DAWN



Editorials for the Month of June 2016

Note: This is a complied work by the Team CSS Mentor.com. The DAWN.COM is the owner of the content available in the document. This document is compiled to support css aspirants and This document is **NOT FOR SALE**. You may order this booklet and only printing and shipping cost will be incurred.

Complied & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

www.thecsspoint.com

10012345678902

CSSBOOKS.NET

BUY CSS BOOKS ONLINE

CASH ON DELIVERY

ALL OVER PAKISTAN

WWW.CSSBOOKS.NET

ALL COMPULSORY AND OPTIONAL SUBJECTS BOOK FROM SINGLE POINT

ORDER NOW

0726540316 - 03336042057

DOWNLOAD

CSS Notes, Books, MCQs, Magazines



WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM

- **Download CSS Notes**
- **Download CSS Books**
- **Download CSS Magazines**
- **Download CSS MCQs**
- **Download CSS Past Papers**

The CSS Point, Pakistan's The Best Online FREE Web source for All CSS Aspirants.

Email: info@thecsspoint.com

Table of Contents

More withholding taxes 7
Military in Fata 8
The Indus saga 9
Rediscovering the poor 10
President's speech 11
Bilawal on the road 12
Review of the economy 13
Focus on slavery 14
Science & the ummah 15
Budget without ideas 16
Pathankot probe 17
Commissioner's removal 18
Spurring growth 19
RIP Muhammad Ali 20
Violence against nurses 21
Panama Papers and public policy 22
Militant challenge 23
Afghan displacement 24
Against the NFC spirit 25
PM's surgery cynicism 26
Streamlining charity 27
Another whitener scheme 28
Education for Fata 29
PAT protest 30
US support for India on NSG 31
Mysterious huddle 33
Bangladesh killings 34
Sexism in the NA 35
Economic outlook 37
Muttahida's travails 38

Slipping Pak-US ties 39
Killing women 41
UN under pressure 42
Hillary's nomination 43
Panama impasse 44
Derogatory language 45
A violent world 46
Critical choices ahead 47
Sindh budget 48
Orlando shooting 49
Punjab budget 50
An intolerant society 51
Fata reforms 52
KP budget 54
Divisive rhetoric 55
Torkham hostilities 56
Missing NCSW 58
RLNG terms 59
The operation two years on 60
Stock market jubilation 61
Obama's outreach 63
Weather warning system 64
ECP membership 65
Atrocities against Yazidis 66
Economic inheritances 67
Video 'confessions' 68
Gujarat verdict 69
Bombing Syria 70
Funds and transparency 71
PCB's coming of age 72
Food safety awareness 73
Balochistan budget 74
Pakistan's strategy vis-à-vis NSG 75

Measuring poverty 77
Refugees in Pakistan 78
Talk of dividing Sindh 79
Brazen kidnapping 81
Strained foreign ties 82
Snow leopards 83
Sabri's murder 84
Tragedy to spectacle 86
Funds for madressah 87
The great unravelling 88
DG ISPR's grievance 89
Radio Pakistan, Karachi 91
Regional proxies 92
Torture by the state 93
PTI chief's threat 94
CASA's promise 95
Firefighting measures 96
Balochistan's corruption problem 97
Priorities and public health 98
Karachi security 99
Fallujah's liberation 101
Brexit wake-up call for Pakistan 102
Reference against PM 103
Police recruitment 104
India-Pakistan: hardening positions 105
Istanbul carnage 107
Over the moon 108

More withholding taxes

EARLY reports about the forthcoming budget suggest a great expansion in the use of withholding taxes to meet future revenue needs. Of particular interest is the proposed expansion of the withholding tax on bank transactions of non-filers of returns. Last year, the measure was announced and billed specifically as an inducement to get people to file their returns. But having tasted the easy revenue that the tax yielded, it appears the government is now preparing to expand the scope of this tax and make it applicable to 18 more sectors. It is clear that by now the tax did little to spur documentation of the economy, and the failure of the tax amnesty scheme offered to traders this year testifies to that. But as a revenue measure, it has worked well. Expanding its scope, therefore, can longer be said to be a documentation exercise, and the tax has become a revenue line now.

This is a wholly regrettable development. Banking transaction taxes have been rejected in many countries because they do not tax incomes or consumption, which are the two core bases from where revenue should come. Transaction taxes, as pure revenue measures, are not only inequitable, they also stifle growth and promote informality. So long as the tax was conceived and implemented only as a penalty for non-filers it was acceptable. But its transformation into a revenue line bodes ill for the future. In due course, as it yields up its easy revenue, it is likely to be expanded further and eventually come to include those who file their returns as well.

In large part, the measure is the result of failed tax reforms. It has been a couple of decades now that the country has been trying to move towards a consumption tax regime, as well as upgraded administration to strengthen direct tax collection. In the 2013 IMF programme, that effort was abandoned and, since then, the PML-N government has been increasing its reliance on withholding taxes of various sorts to energise its revenue effort. In all the budgets of this government, the bulk of new revenue measures have been in withholding mode, with the banking transaction tax only the latest permutation in this series of developments. Without a commitment to undertaking comprehensive tax reform, the country is left to muddle through with measures that place a growing burden on productive activity, as well as squeeze those already within the tax net. It is unlikely that the next budget will break from this trend, and although the new revenue required for the next year is likely to be slightly lower than what it was last year, the resort to withholding and bank transaction taxes will continue unabated. Five lost years in the tax reform effort makes for a bad track record.

Published in Dawn, June 1st, 2016

Military in Fata

NECESSARY as it is for the political government to lead the rehabilitation and resettlement phase in Fata, especially North Waziristan, in the near-total absence of civilian input, the task is falling to the military leadership — with uncertain long-term consequences for the region. The military leadership, as evidenced by the Peshawar corps commander's relatively candid news conference on Monday, is trying to do its best, and there is certainly a sense of purpose and determination in its actions. Operation Zarb-i-Azb has been a counter-insurgency success, complementary counterterrorism operations in Khyber Pakthunkhwa are ongoing, and the military appears determined to send IDPs back to a life where hardships enforced by war are mitigated a great deal. There is no reason to doubt that, as pledged by the corps commander, if all goes to plan, rehabilitation work in Fata will be completed by 2019 and by 2021 the military will hand over security duties to the FC and local levies. But as Swat, Balochistan and counter-insurgency generally have demonstrated, the best of intentions and the most specific of plans tend to crumble in the face of governance failures and strategic policy errors.

Until the political class begins to take its responsibilities towards Fata seriously, the security establishment will continue to dominate Fata policy. So, perhaps the candidness of the military commanders should turn inwards to examine policy mistakes, old and new, that could derail the military's plan to normalise Fata. The increasing blame on Afghan safe havens of anti-Pakistan militants mirrors Kabul's long-standing complaint that were it not for Afghan Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan, Afghanistan would have been stabilised years ago. Surely, while sanctuaries are a problem for both countries, they are not the core of the problem. Next, while border management is a crucial aspect of Pak-Afghan relations, the military-led approach being pursued is not the right solution. Border decisions need to be taken in political capitals because implementing those decisions is not simply about local, border-area military actions. If anything, militarised border management will only lead to existing problems being pushed further underground and new political tensions being layered on top. Finally, Fata communities will not be rebuilt by economic incentives alone — there has to be a sense of local ownership in the rebuilding and revival of post-conflict areas. The military should be seen as protectors of last resort, not all-powerful overlords.

Published in Dawn, June 1st, 2016

The Indus saga

THE Indus Valley civilisation is amongst the oldest in a long list of cultures that this land has seen. But as scientists from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, and the Archaeological Survey of India have recently discovered, the Indus Valley culture may be much older than is currently believed. As per a report published in Nature, researchers say the civilisation may be up to 8,000 years old; this would make it older than the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures. The thought is fascinating, even though we know so very little about this ancient civilisation, primarily because its script remains undeciphered. Researchers have also come up with another unique conclusion: they say it was probably climate change that led to the end of this culture. If the findings of the research are further substantiated, it would make the Indus Valley culture around 2,500 years older than previously thought.

As an inheritor of the Indus Valley civilisation, these findings should be of great interest to Pakistan. After all, it is in Sindh's district Larkana that Moenjodaro — one of the jewels in the crown of the Indus Valley civilisation — is located, whereas Harappa in Punjab is another key site. The process of uncovering the remains of the Indus Valley culture occurred in the colonial period, in the early decades of the 20th century. However, we have not come very far when it comes to unravelling the mysteries of this lost culture. Moreover, the vagaries of time, the harshness of the weather, and the neglect of man have all taken their toll on these magnificent ruins. It is also true that much of Moenjodaro remains unexcavated. It goes without saying that the state needs to prioritise the upkeep of this and other cultural and historical treasures that are spread out across Pakistan. Also, the government should take the initiative by engaging local and foreign experts to study the Indus Valley culture through the use of scientific methods.

Published in Dawn, June 1st, 2016

Rediscovering the poor

FOR a decade now, the numbers have been misleading us. Poverty has been falling, we've been told, since 2005, and the number of people in Pakistan living below the poverty line has come down from 34.1pc in 2000 to 9.3pc by 2014. Over this period, the policy conversation on poverty, and measures required for its alleviation, has also shrivelled up; for many years now, the only response that policymakers have when asked about poverty is the Benazir Income Support Programme. The latter has proved itself sound, passing numerous reviews conducted by the World Bank and the Punjab government, and its role in mitigating the impact of poverty on millions should not be discounted. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient, and at best provides only support and not alleviation. Creating pathways out of poverty has not been discussed at the policy level, whether in the formulation of the budget or otherwise. In his maiden Economic Survey presentation, the finance minister acknowledged problems in the poverty data, but could only present economic and industrial growth as the vision to lift people out of poverty.

Now we are told that with a small tweak to the poverty line, the number of those living below the line rises to almost one third. The old poverty line was drawn in the year 2001 and was built on food calorific intake as the measure. The new line, just adopted and announced this week, takes 'cost of basic needs' as its measure, and shows that more than 29pc of the population lives in poverty. Clearly, the absolute number of those living below the poverty line is a lot higher than what the old data was telling us. But the number has still declined since 2001, when it would have been just above 63pc.

So what should we look at — the long-term decline or the jump due to the change in methodology? The answer is the latter, primarily because no new thinking appears to exist on how to move forward on lessening this figure. In rupee terms, the old line considered any adult existing on Rs2,502 per month to be living in poverty, while the new one raises this to Rs3,030. That a small addition of only about Rs500 per month should suddenly increase the head count so drastically shows the large number of people clumped around the poverty line. The prime minister has approved a package for the agriculture economy — where poverty rates are highest — and that includes cheapening the cost of inputs to spur growth. No fresh thinking on how to tackle poverty directly, or to create pathways out of it, appears to be in the works, leaving the poor out of the economy for one more year.

Published in Dawn, June 2nd, 2016

President's speech

A PRESIDENTIAL address to a joint sitting of parliament to mark the start of the new parliamentary year could be an opportunity for a government to lay out a legislative and policy agenda for the year ahead. However, with the exit of former president Asif Zardari and the presidency becoming a ceremonial office once again, the joint address has rapidly become a non-event, a constitutional requirement that all involved, the speech-giver and his parliamentary audience, appear to have little interest in. President Mamnoon Hussain has certainly played his part in the relegation of the presidency to a position of national irrelevance, but when it comes to yesterday's speech he can hardly be faulted for the straitjacket he's been put in by the political government. There were at least two welcome passages in the president's speech on the need for more effective population planning and bringing more women into the workforce. For the most part, however, it was stock praise for the government's self-claimed economic achievements and rehashing of the importance of democracy and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Kashmir earned its usual reference and the government's responsibility to expand the tax base was also included. It was, in short, a speech to forget.

There is a way this particular constitutional requirement could be invigorated. If the political government approaches the speech like the queen's speech to parliament in the United Kingdom, where the government sets outs its priorities for the parliamentary year ahead and outlines proposed policies and legislation, the annual ritual here would be infused with a welcome degree of relevance. However, for that to happen, the government of the day — and political parties in general — would need to overhaul their approach to governance. While the executive must necessarily respond to events and contingencies, stable and successful democratic orders bring a degree of planning to the work of the government. Can either of the two governments in the current era of democratic transition claim to have had a structured, yearly legislative agenda? While milestone legislation and constitutional amendments have been passed, the parliamentary year is still not a unit of time around which governments plan their agendas. Finally, to have the president state policy and legislative agendas of a government would not politicise the presidency, as some critics may allege, but establish a healthy democratic convention that could help the symbol of the federation return to a degree of much-needed visibility and relevance.

Published in Dawn, June 2nd, 2016

Bilawal on the road

BILAWAL Bhutto Zardari has just taken a rally into Azad Kashmir, stirring up yet one more time the debate about the likelihood of his PPP recapturing some lost ground in Pakistani politics. Many may have been persuaded by the tone and tenor of the young jiyala chief to predict some kind of a comeback for the once vibrant outfit, but nobody is saying that this is going to happen anytime soon. It is a tough road that cannot be crossed quickly on the back of a note of appreciation from the powerful world, such as the one the increasingly emboldened PPP leader received from Hillary Clinton, via Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani, the other day. The gradually acquired boldness and the old-ties, old-charisma formula that the party is trying to apply to the June 26 polls in Kashmir also offers no guarantees for even limited success. This is a tortuous route with no certainty of redemption or even a small increase in popularity.

The images of the PPP rally from Punjab to Kashmir have been hailed as a sign of change. Reading too much into them can prove disastrously counterproductive for those who are desirous of some kind of a PPP return. The more real and relevant trend is where the well-known PPP names in Kashmir continue to ditch the party for timely inclusion in PML-N or PTI. PPP officials may insist that these defections are caused by internal politics and that only those who cannot be or ought not to be accommodated by the party are jumping ship in the run-up to the election. While this could be true to some extent the exodus is far too great for it to be not linked to public perceptions about which party is on the rise and which is slipping in the rankings. Perhaps Bilawal Bhutto Zardari is constrained to work with known PPP politicians — at a level above the workers. Perhaps he should try and go lower to discover an opportunity to establish trust and cultivate loyalty.

Published in Dawn, June 2nd, 2016

Review of the economy

IF ever the devil was in the detail, it was at the point when the finance minister announced, as he presented the Economic Survey yesterday, that Pakistan was back on the growth track. The economy grew by 4.7pc for the current fiscal, despite a steep fall in agricultural output totalling 0.5pc of GDP. The external sector "has become more stable" as reserves have risen and the current account deficit has shrunk. Inflation is falling, the rupee is stable and "has been able to gain economic fundamentals due to a very focused approach towards resolving structural issues such as energy and gas shortages". Then we are told that large-scale manufacturing is going strong, which "suggests vibes from domestic commerce are highly positive". This is the world the survey tries to paint.

Unfortunately, the vibes from the real world are not as rosy. Growth on the back of a boom in construction and automobile sales makes for a good future only for those who drive cars and live in cemented houses. The external sector can only "become more stable" if the build-up of reserves doesn't owe itself mainly to "continued flows from IFIs; and a sharp decline in global oil prices", but to a robust increase in exports and inflows of foreign investment. And ramping up the turbines in the power sector does not count as "structural reform". Following up on the agenda to create autonomous boards for the distribution companies does count as such, as well as reforming the machinery to encourage documentation and broadening the tax base.

The government has managed to stabilise the economy. But it appears to be struggling to grow beyond this firefighting role. Where are the big ideas to spur growth in agriculture, or open up sustainable inflows of foreign exchange? Where are the big ideas on revenue generation and documentation, now that we have had our fill of withholding taxes and have seen banking transaction tax lead to little more than an increase in cash holding in the economy? There are undoubtedly many positives in this year's economic story. The return of business confidence on the back of a stabilising security environment is one example. The pick-up in pace of CPEC projects is another. But these elements can play a supportive role, or provide the context for a revival of economic activity. They cannot be the story itself. Given that this is the last full fiscal year of the government's term, it is imperative that they work to build a legacy that is more reliable, and certainly a lot more equitable, than cars and construction. Agriculture will take a lot more than price inducements to revive as well. The budget today will show how much new thinking there is, but it is safe to say nobody is holding their breath.

Published in Dawn, June 3rd, 2016

Focus on slavery

SHOCKING as it is, slavery is a widespread phenomenon in the modern world, with a large chunk of humanity deprived of their freedom. As per the Walk Free Foundation's Global Survey Index released recently, there are over 45 million people trapped in slavery across the globe. The most, by far, are in India (18.35m), while China has 3.39m people living in slavery. Unfortunately, Pakistan is near the top of this unenviable list, with 2.13m individuals living in servitude. As per the report, practices such as forced labour, debt bondage and forced marriage all qualify as modern slavery. Experts say that over the years, the number of slaves has not increased, but more data has become available.

The fact that Pakistan is featured so prominently in this dubious list is a matter of deep distress. In this country, debt bondage is particularly acute, with the HRCP pointing out that over two million individuals are trapped in the brick kiln industry and the agriculture sector. Beyond these formal definitions of modern slavery, it is also true that many workers are treated as slaves in other sectors as well (for example, domestic help and sweatshops). They often work in slave-like conditions and are susceptible to exploitation. As far as the law goes, slavery is not only unconstitutional, the Supreme Court has also banned bonded labour — many in the latter category have been freed. But as the data shows, despite these legal safeguards, far too many individuals in Pakistan remain caught in the vicious cycle of modern slavery, with entire families, in some cases, trapped in debt bondage. A law calling for the abolition of bonded labour was passed at the federal level in the early 1990s, but as with combating so many other social evils, implementation of the law has been wanting. Furthermore, with devolution, the provinces are required to frame their own anti-slavery laws. While Punjab has done so, Sindh has not; the problem of bonded labour primarily affects these provinces. The district administration and police must be at the forefront of cracking down on slavery countrywide. Beyond enforcement of the law, there needs to be a societal realisation that makes it clear to all — worker, employer, state — that in the modern world, there is just no place for slavery in any form and that men and women, born free, cannot be 'owned' by anyone. Moreover, particular attention must be given to rescuing minors from slavery.

Published in Dawn, June 3rd, 2016

Science & the ummah

THE OIC Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation, or Comstech, of which Pakistan is the chairman, has come up with a 10-year plan for reforming science education in member countries. As one of the first steps under the plan, and coming as a bit of a surprise, Islamabad, that has so far been the recipient of grants and other sundry favours, has broken with tradition and offered 100 scholarships to candidates from OIC countries in fields such as medicine, agriculture and engineering. The plan was approved at a Comstech meeting in Islamabad earlier this week. Going by the details that have emerged in the media it is yet another attempt at somehow finding the lost bridge between research and the Muslim world. This country has been among those that have been held hostage by theorists who forbid scientific learning in the name of faith. Those who understand the merits of studying modern subjects with diligence and commitment would want Pakistan to live up to the words of President Mamnoon Hussain and Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, spoken during the Comstech sessions, about the country's desire to lead the initiative.

There could be little disagreement with the minister when he emphasised the need to "have a fresh look" at "the legal frameworks and institutional structures … responsible for promotion of science … and innovation in our respective countries". These institutions, though vital, will be difficult to sustain without hard work. To turn the latest Comstech meeting from a ritual into an earnest endeavour will require a lot of resolve. The president raised a question the answer to which will determine the extent to which the OIC components are committed to pursuing the path and objectives of the plan. He talked about the need for OIC countries to contribute financially to Comstech's 10-year push that has been prepared by more than 150 experts. The response to his call will define just how much of an interest the members have in the plan's successful execution.

Published in Dawn, June 3rd, 2016

Budget without ideas

Yesterday's was one of the sleepiest and most lethargic budgets the country has seen in many years. Not only the mood within parliament, but the budget proposals themselves evoked little more than weary nods. The finance minister could not hold the attention of his own party that had to be reminded on a couple of occasions that the measure just announced deserved some desk thumping.

But the apathy showed mostly in the proposals to lift revenues and rejuvenate collapsing sectors. The budget sees growing recourse to withholding taxes, turnover taxes and transaction taxes, whereas income and consumption are dropping off the taxman’s radar. These are not only regressive measures, they signal defeat in the larger struggle the party saw as its own to broaden the base of taxation.

Examine: Budget 2016-17: New taxes added, some withdrawn

A more detailed examination of the new tax measures will show where the incremental revenue from next year will come from. But the budget speech left little doubt that the government has comprehensively run out of ideas on tax reforms, and broadening the tax base has been lost as a priority.

No vision is now at play. In the last full fiscal year of its term, the government intends to tread water and fight fires, buying little more time to make it past the finish line.

The PML-N began its term with loud promises to reform the power sector, to broaden the base of taxation, to bring more taxpayers into the net, and to stop the bleeding of public-sector enterprises. All that proved to be bombast, and in the closing years of its rule, the party presents a haggard look.

That itself would not be a problem if it weren’t for the fact that it feeds into an inherent contradiction. Faced with a daunting challenge to address the collapse in exports and agriculture, the government came up with nothing more than more price inducements in the form of reduction in fertiliser prices or incentives in the form of zero rating of sales tax on textile exports.

One can only hope that these measures help to lift these vital sectors from the doldrums, but doubts hang heavy in the air. The contradiction is that the revenue measures they are resorting to weigh down growth by squeezing existing taxpayers more, so whatever energy the price inducements can inject into these moribund sectors might be negated with the deleterious effects of the measures.

It is fair to hope that this will not happen, but we cannot build our future on such hopes. And that is where the PML-N has brought us all in the twilight of its term: it hopes that muddling through is enough, that CPEC will save us all.

It would have been easier to swallow this reality had we seen the government at least try to undertake some serious reform.

Published in Dawn, June 4th, 2016

Pathankot probe

IF normalisation is ever to occur — and surely it must — then much will depend on how responsibly the Pakistani and Indian states behave towards one another. The key to that will lie in not stoking the flames when there's a downswing or pause, and in creating a constructive opening when there is space. The Pathankot air force base attack clearly falls in the former category. It was a downswing that had to be managed sensibly and carefully. Yet, and perhaps to the surprise of many, the two states have managed to avoid a damaging blame game. The statement by Indian director general, National Investigation Agency, Sharad Kumar, that no evidence has been found by India so far that the Pakistani state helped facilitate the Pathankot attack is important. Predictably, there has been a political backlash in India, and hawks in Pakistan have seized on the comment with relish. The NIA has also subsequently tried to moderate Mr Kumar's comments and the Indian foreign ministry to qualify them. But all of that is in the nature of cross-border politics. Mr Kumar's candid remarks fit in the overall picture since January — both India and Pakistan have strived to keep the focus on investigation by professionals and experts and avoided incendiary political rhetoric.

Pakistan, it must be stressed, quickly moved to investigate the attack. The unprecedented visit by a Pakistani joint investigation team consisting of both civilian and military investigators to India sent a signal that the old, reflexive habit of denial was being cast aside. While it is true that six months from the attack no one has been charged with crime, it is also clear that there has been no attempt by Pakistan to try and simply cast the matter aside and pretend it is of no significance. But Pathankot did expose a wider problem that the Pakistani state continues to try and deflect: the anti-India militant complex that is thriving on its soil. It remains to be proven in a court of law that Jaish-e-Mohammad was involved in the Pathankot attack, but there can be no doubt that Jaish has a violent, militant agenda and that its existence is an affront to the rule of law and constructive foreign policy. Jaish and several other such groups, none more so than

Lashkar-e-Taiba, represent an ill-conceived past that should not be allowed to hold this country's present and future hostage. Zero tolerance is the only viable option.

Published in Dawn, June 4th, 2016

Commissioner's removal

DESPITE their vocal support for the democratic process and devolution, it is clear that for many of our political mandarins, the urge to micromanage affairs of governance is simply too strong to resist. This is particularly visible in how the PPP-led Sindh government handles civic affairs of the province's urban areas, especially Karachi. On Thursday, it emerged that Asif Hyder Shah had been removed from his position as Karachi commissioner. Apparently, the official, described as honest and efficient, had rubbed some in the provincial hierarchy the wrong way. As conventional wisdom illustrates, many honest officials in the state's machinery are put to pasture if they fail to toe the party line, or lock horns with their political bosses. This may be true in the former commissioner's case also. As reported in this paper, the Sindh local government minister had 'issues' with the official, which resulted in Mr Shah's ouster from the job less than five months after he was put in charge of the metropolis. The plaints against him apparently made it to the ears of PPP supremo Asif Zardari who, from his foreign redoubt, gave the green signal for the official's removal.

What is important here is not the transfer or posting of an official; this is part of routine government business. What is problematic is the fact that any state functionary can be dismissed for not catering to the whims of political bosses. It also reflects the PPP's lack of regard for Karachi's well-being. That the official was doing a fairly decent job can be gauged from the fact that even the opposition MQM — which had initially opposed his appointment — was critical of the dismissal. The PPP in Sindh — not known for its stellar governance — seems least concerned about Karachi or other urban areas of Sindh. With the elected local governments yet to take up their duties, it seems that urban Sindh will have to continue to suffer from civic neglect for the time being.

Published in Dawn, June 4th, 2016

Spurring growth

THE budget for the next fiscal year is rightly changing gear and going from stabilisation to growth. The situation inherited by the government in 2013 was veering towards a large-scale crisis, although the latter was not exactly imminent at the time and the state of affairs was nowhere near as dire as the one that the previous PPP government inherited in 2008. Nevertheless, macroeconomic stability has indeed been restored, and with reserves at a record high, inflation falling, signs of a revival in industrial activity under way and the fiscal deficit coming down year after year, the government is right to claim that the macroeconomic fundamentals have been brought under control. For now anyway.

Now comes the hard part. Achieving macroeconomic stability on the back of an IMF programme is usually achieved by most countries in a couple of years. Transiting to growth is then a relatively simpler job because it means a return to a fiscal policy aimed at boosting industry through a combination of incentives and reforms. In Pakistan's case, that transition is complicated by a number of factors. First is the growing role of informal-sector activities, evidenced in the centre of gravity of the present growth in areas such as construction and services. Second is the rigid base of our industrial sector, dominated by textiles and other low-tech products that are less responsive to government inducements than other industries. And third is the prospect of the return of political instability.

The growing informality in the economy can be seen in the government's failed attempts to broaden the base of taxation and bring sectors such as retail and wholesale trade into the net. More than 80pc of the new money created in the current fiscal year has stayed in circulation as cash, rather than entering the banking system, showing the clout wielded by unregistered players and their resistance to government efforts at formalisation. Transiting towards growth in the face of large-scale and growing informality can be difficult if the inducements given to economic players have a way of landing up in informal activities such as property speculation. The government is aware of this, which is why it has introduced taxation measures to try and capture some of the transactions taking place in the booming property market and construction sector. But it is highly probable that the measures could backfire, like last year's bank transaction tax, and lead to people understating the value of property transactions even further. These must shift though, and informality must be tamed. The right objective has been set for this year in the budget. But given the weak measures with which to pursue it, as well as the presence of a volatile opposition, the government will have to walk a tightrope to keep to its path — and walk it firmly.

Published in Dawn, June 5th, 2016

RIP Muhammad Ali

IT is impossible to define the legacy of Muhammad Ali — 'The Greatest' — in a few lines. He was an athlete par excellence and a fine human being who transcended the status afforded by the boxing ring to be known the world over as a symbol of resistance. His style of play was reflective of a man who wanted to stand his ground, applying aggression only as a last resort. He was no dry disapprover imprisoning himself in a cocoon away from the world he had problems with. He loved life and knew that, with a spirited fight, it could be drastically improved. He loved the fun, the jokes, the poetry including the verses he came up with about boxing legend and his chief rival Joe Frazier. Muhammad Ali had a natural understanding of how to exploit the popular sentiment to achieve the goal he set himself. He was an icon whose example was cited to pursue all kinds of challenges. Not least amongst the latter was a drive aimed at deriding boxing as a non-sport by citing how Ali suffered from Parkinson's — because of the barrage of punches he faced during a long career shaped after the famous fight with Sony Liston in the 1960s.

The greatest of entertainers usually got his deals right, except maybe for the bout with Antonio Inoki in June 1976. This very forgettable, unabashedly forced attempt at fusion had the Japanese wrestler 'facing' Muhammad Ali lying down, literally, for the entire duration of the contest. It was clear that time was finally approaching the man who teased his opponents with his 'catch me if you can' chant. One of the most glittering careers inside the ropes was heading towards a close. This was a sign of the changing world, and though Muhammad Ali continued to influence causes for the next 40 years of his life, he had already made a great impact. The 15 years from 1960 to 1975 belonged to him. He emerged as a champion of the less heard with his powerful dissent against the American war on Vietnam. It was not just what he said but the down-to-earth manner in which he said it which endeared him to those pursuing civil liberties. And even when he could not speak as frequently in the latter years because of his illness, his nod was most sought after to give movement and sting to any campaign he chose to support.

Published in Dawn, June 5th, 2016

Violence against nurses

THERE are numerous recent examples of the police using brute force to stifle legitimate protest. Lady health workers, teachers, blind people, etc have all suffered violence of this kind. This time, the courts added another dimension to the disproportionate force meted out by the state against ordinary citizens. On Thursday in Peshawar, police beat up dozens of protesting nurses gathered in front of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly to demand improvement in their working conditions. They also took into custody around 20 male and two female nurses. While the women were soon released, the men were detained overnight after which a local court ordered that they be sent to jail on judicial remand for 14 days. While they were subsequently released on bail, the FIR filed against them lists rather exaggerated charges — including, among others, criminal intimidation, rioting and the misuse of loudspeakers.

When a state comes down so hard on peaceful protesters, it betrays its contempt for a means of democratic expression provided for in a system that is supposed to be of the people, by the people and for the people. The charges are also farcical: speaking against the government is part and parcel of a democracy, whether on loudspeaker or otherwise. And shouting slogans or causing a traffic jam does not constitute a riot. Moreover, when seen in the context of the kid-glove treatment reserved for religious extremists and self-appointed keepers of the nation's morality who on numerous occasions have rampaged through the streets virtually unimpeded, this wanton aggression smacks of a state in retreat. The law should be applied to regulate the actions of citizens, rather than brandished as a weapon to silence weaker segments of society or else held in abeyance when it comes to those perceived as being powerful for various reasons. Admittedly, the provincial government had already announced some concessions for the nursing sector, but it should continue talking to the protesters so as to arrive at an equitable solution.

Published in Dawn, June 5th, 2016

Panama Papers and public policy

THE talks between the government and the parliamentary opposition have fallen into a predictable pattern: the hard bargaining appears to be centred on the Panama Papers and who is to be investigated and who isn't — and not on reforms or systemic improvements. Clearly, the revelations in the Panama Papers have raised both legal and ethical questions of the country's political and business elite, and none more so than of the family of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Determining if any laws have been violated and assigning guilt is of great importance — if Pakistan is ever to have a better, more responsive, people-oriented democracy, the political leadership of the country needs to be held to progressively higher standards of conduct. Yet, the Panama Papers can and should be about more than simply determining if an elected prime minister and the political and business elite have violated the law of the land.

Are the applicable laws adequate, and what does public policy have to say about the vast sums of money that are under the control of a small group of individuals? Those are broader questions that perhaps should be included in the ToRs or debated inside parliament. The national debate over offshore companies owned by wealthy Pakistanis is led by a public expressing its desire to see that wealth earned inside Pakistan is put to use inside the country for productive purposes. To achieve that by way of old-fashioned capital controls or criminalising legitimate individual choices of wealthy individuals would be counterproductive. But surely the overall economic incentive structure can be looked at to determine why wealthy Pakistanis opt for offshore companies and tax havens. Is the Federal Board of Revenue inside Pakistan a predatory organisation? Are investment and business opportunities inside Pakistan bottled up? What are the conflicts of interest when public officials and political leaders are also owners of vast commercial businesses?

Unhappily, neither parliament nor the teams negotiating the ToRs appear much concerned about the public policy aspects of the Panama Papers. It may well be that in the course of the judicial commission's works, new information will come to light that will suggest the need for legislative or administrative action. The judicial commission that investigated the claims of electoral fraud in the 2013 general election exposed a number of flaws in the electoral process and made sensible recommendations to fix the problems uncovered. Ideally, the Panama Papers inquiry would lead to a range of recommendations for public policy to consider. But are our elected representatives really interested in that?

Published in Dawn, June 6th, 2016

Militant challenge

THE end of Operation Zarb-i-Azb has been speculated about for a while. On occasion, the military has suggested that it will be an open-ended operation, with counter-insurgency in North Waziristan morphing into counterterrorism operations in the cities. However, Gen Raheel Sharif's comments to the Formation Commanders' Conference on Thursday would appear to suggest that the military has a definite timeline in mind when it comes to the conclusion of Zarb-i-Azb — and that the end of the operation may only be months away. If the operation does come to a close soon, it would be a milestone in Pakistan's fight against militancy. While other major operations have been fought in the past — in Swat and South Waziristan in particular — North Waziristan, both for operational reasons and for those of perception, had come to be regarded as a kind of final frontier: wresting North Waziristan away from militants and re-establishing the state's writ in the agency would signal a return to a more internally secure Pakistan. The bravery and sacrifices of the soldiers who have fought in Zarb-i-Azb deserve the highest praise.

Yet, great challenges remain in the fight against militancy. While the banned TTP and affiliated groups may be decimated, the full spectrum of militancy continues to pose significant threats. There is also, beyond military operations and counterterrorism actions, the more complicated tasks of counter-extremism and de-radicalisation. Therefore, the end of Zarb-i-Azb, necessary as it may be, should bring with it some clarity and direction in the next phase of the long war. The National Action Plan may have a great deal of merit but it appears to have been virtually abandoned by both the political and military leaderships. In any case, NAP does not provide a phased approach, one that creates a road map in the post-Zarb-i-Azb security situation. Unhappily, if the absence of a declared road map is worrying enough, the means to create one is even more in doubt at the moment. From Zarb-i-Azb, the next logical step was to tackle the militant infrastructure in Punjab — and the infrastructure of all militants, not just those who have taken up arms against Pakistan. But the government does not appear to regard militancy in Punjab as a serious matter, while the security establishment seems uninterested in shutting down anti-India militant groups that are based in the province but that have spread their networks across the country. Surely, the nation's security demands a less myopic approach.

Published in Dawn, June 6th, 2016

Afghan displacement

GIVEN the increasing focus on Afghan refugees inside Pakistan, it is often forgotten by people here that this vulnerable group also finds itself displaced within its own borders. According to an Amnesty International report poignantly titled, My Children Will Die This Winter: Afghanistan's Broken Promise to the Displaced, Afghan refugees continue to live in appalling conditions without adequate shelter, food, water, education or healthcare facilities. This situation marks the failure of the Kabul government to implement the 2014 IDP policy — not surprising given the lack of resources and expertise in addition to corruption. With aid money dwindling, the international community must be held to its pledges to end the displacement crisis. With a staggering 1.2 million people internally displaced in Afghanistan — an increase from 500,000 in 2013 — the overall situation is reflective of the ominous shape of things to come. For its part, Pakistan, host to 1.5 million documented Afghan refugees, must understand the implications of this crisis. While it is true that Afghan refugees have, of late, increasingly found themselves in the cross hairs of the Pakistani state, any move to forcibly repatriate them will only breed a generation deprived of education and job opportunities but with access to militancy. This would defeat the counterterrorism efforts of both countries that should be cooperating on providing the refugees with security and shelter rather than indulging in political point-scoring against one another.

Meanwhile, that the Afghans — after the Syrians — make up the second largest population of migrants (2.6 million people) is a stark reminder that reasons for migration — security, economic stagnation and staggering unemployment rates — remain the same. The UN asked for $393m in humanitarian funding for Afghanistan this year — the smallest amount in years despite the crisis. By May, it had received less than a quarter of that figure. This points to lethargy and a lack of commitment. It is, therefore, incumbent on Kabul and the international community to ensure the IDP policy is implemented to prevent a worsening of the crisis.

Published in Dawn, June 6th, 2016

Against the NFC spirit

EVER SINCE the PML-N government came to power, it has back-pedalled from the spirit of the last NFC award. In the latest budget, it has announced a step to disallow the inclusion of sales tax on services paid to the provinces as an input adjustment. This is the latest in a series of measures that takes the economic management of the country away from what was envisioned by the NFC award. In addition, the provinces have been full of complaints that their share of the funds collected under the federal divisible pool — an amount that comes to almost 44pc of gross federal revenue receipts this year — is usually not released on time. The growing transfers to the provinces each year since the NFC award was announced in 2010 have weighed on federal finances, creating a perverse incentive to find ways to roll back the gains made by the provinces in that historic award. It is crucial though that the spirit of that award be advanced rather than rolled back, and provincial governments be strengthened rather than disempowered, for the federation to become stronger.

The present government is moving in the opposite direction though. Since provincial transfers, once agreed in the NFC award, cannot be reduced as per the Constitution, they have found new and innovative ways to chip away at the edifice envisioned in the eighth award. They have withheld the transfers on various pretexts, or asked provinces to run obligatory surpluses. Last year, the budgeted surplus estimated from the provinces was Rs297bn, which was then revised up by 13pc to Rs336bn. This year the budgeted surplus is Rs339bn, which will also inevitably be revised upward. These are largely forced surpluses and they come on top of administrative delays in the release of provincial funds.

The Sindh government has rightly raised alarm over another measure in the finance bill this year, the effect of which will be to prevent the collection of sales tax on services by the provincial revenue authorities. The KP government has similarly been concerned over the failure to release net hydel profits, and protested how these have been pegged to a paltry amount of Rs6bn per annum. The biggest evidence though of the government's reluctance to advance the spirit of the eighth NFC award lies in its failure to even hold the meetings required for the next award. The first meeting took place on April 28 this year, when working groups were formed, almost three years into the government's term. Building a working relationship with the provincial governments can burnish the political credentials of the PML-N, which has suffered under the perception of being a party from Punjab. But thus far it appears they are not interested in broadening their support beyond the province they control.

Published in Dawn, June 7th, 2016

PM's surgery cynicism

POLITICS is not, and should not, be for the faint-hearted. Men and women seeking to be elected leaders of the people must be able to engage in robust debate with one another and survive the harshest of public scrutiny. Only from that would emerge a leader capable of delivering the democratic needs and aspirations of the voting public. But there does come a point at which rhetorical crudeness crosses over into the terrain of the inadvisable. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's heart surgery in London has not been handled well politically or administratively by the PML-N: no independent, professional opinion on the state of the prime minister's health has been offered by the government and there has been unnecessary confusion about how the executive is to function during Mr Sharif's absence from the country. Yet, it is troubling that so wild and reckless has the political arena become in Pakistan that several of the PML-N's political rivals have questioned whether Mr Sharif has undergone surgery at all, the clear implication being that somehow surgery in London was invented as an excuse by the prime minister to draw attention away from the Panama Papers.

On Sunday, Imran Khan exemplified the churlishness of the political discourse by suggesting that Prime Minister Sharif's heart condition was linked to the conflicting accounts given by his sons regarding the ownership of family properties in London. Perhaps the PTI supremo is unaware of his own position as the leader of the second-largest political party in the country, in terms of votes received in the last election, and how his behaviour can influence the public conversation and affect the tone of overall media coverage. Simply put, when leaders such as Mr Khan dabble in conspiracy theory or outrageous sentiment, a great number of other people take their cue from them, and the preposterous and the outrageous become the new norm. As a victim himself of wild allegations over the years, including by the PML-N, Imran Khan should know better. The problem with Mr Khan's comments is not that it will hurt the PML-N — the party has its own unruly members who need to be restrained in their attacks on Mr Khan — but that it draws into disrepute the very idea of politics itself. Politics in Pakistan is far from the sublime, but when politicians themselves make the political process look ridiculous, it is the democratic process that is threatened.

Published in Dawn, June 7th, 2016

Streamlining charity

IN this age of economic hardship, where many find it difficult to make ends meet, a helping hand is always welcome. But while Pakistanis, despite having many flaws, are known for their charity — one figure suggests this country's citizens give over Rs200bn to charities annually — there are definite ways in which our method of giving can be improved. Over the years, due to widespread poverty, there has been a visible increase in the distribution of ration packs and other household essentials for the needy. This activity picks up pace in or just before the month of Ramazan, when people's urge to give is even greater. However, unless managed smoothly, such exercises can easily go awry, as was observed in Karachi on Sunday. At least six people fell unconscious at a charity bazaar in the metropolis that had been organised by the Jafaria Disaster Cell, a philanthropic outfit. Held at the city's Expo Centre, a stampede ensued when a staggering 200,000 people showed up to pick up free rations and household items.

It is fortunate that no fatalities occurred at the event; previous such exercises have seen deadly tragedies. Some 20 individuals died in a stampede in 2009 when rations were being distributed in Khori Garden, an area located in Karachi's congested old city, while in 2013, two women lost their lives during a melee in the city's Gulshan-i-Iqbal locality during a similar charity event. While the intention to provide a helping hand to the needy is indeed noble, unless such affairs are properly managed, with effective crowd control, tragedy may result. Perhaps an alternative to the above methods could be for philanthropists — individuals as well as organisations — to survey low-income neighbourhoods and have rations and other essentials delivered to the doorstep of deserving families. This would allow for individuals to be helped in a dignified manner, as well as eliminating the chances of stampedes and disorder that can occur when large numbers of people gather in confined spaces to collect charity goods.

Published in Dawn, June 7th, 2016

Another whitener scheme

FOR a number of days now, we have been hearing about a new set of laws that is in the works to enable the whitening of undeclared foreign assets, as well as strengthen the hand of government in pursuing those assets that are not declared.

In doing so, the government is deploying the oldest toolkit in the taxman's armory. Amnesty schemes coupled with penalties for non-compliance have had a poor track record in Pakistan, and the outgoing fiscal year provides the clearest example. In the present case, however, two new laws are being considered.

One called the Undisclosed Foreign Income and Assets Bill 2016 will open a window for those who hold undeclared assets abroad to whiten them. And the second is an amendment to the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, which would enable the authorities to seize an equivalent amount of property in Pakistan owned by anyone who is found holding undeclared foreign assets.

The plan had been in the works long before the Panama Papers controversy broke out.

The interesting thing is that the plan has been developed by the Tax Reforms Commission, one of whose members — Senator Osman Saifullah Khan — was named in the Panama Papers, and given the details in his asset declaration to the ECP, will likely be one of the beneficiaries of the whitener scheme.

So one question to ask is: what happened to previous whitener schemes? Did they produce any results in terms of getting more incomes to be declared? Considering those who are most likely to benefit from such schemes are the same ones who draw them up, it should not come as a surprise that they accomplish nothing. It was a stroke of bad luck for the senator to find himself in the limelight.

Fact of the matter is, just about everybody in the room when such schemes are hatched, have something or the other in the closet.

If the government is working to strengthen the law in order to enable the authorities to pursue those who have accumulated tax evaded wealth, then the package of measures they are working on should be alright. But if they are going to play the old carrot-and-stick game again, we all know how that one ends. Usually it is all carrot and no stick.

The helplessness of the government is once again in full display if a whitener scheme is going to be part of any reforms undertaken to control the accumulation of foreign assets.

At the very least, there ought to be some sort of penalty for whitening undeclared assets. Of course, in a better world we would see all those with undeclared assets undergo an audit to determine whether or not they have concealed sources of income. But that is a wish for another time.

Published in Dawn, June 8th, 2016

Education for Fata

ALTHOUGH Pakistan's annual education statistics outline stark realities such as low school enrolment and retention rates as well as inadequate resources and infrastructure, successive governments have yet to comprehend the benefits of educating 24 million out-of-school children.

In Fata alone, the Directorate of Education failed to enrol some 150,000 children in primary education during a two-month campaign ending on May 31.

Aimed at essentially enrolling 400,000 out-of-school children in primary education as part of a three-year drive in the country's militancy-affected northwest, the campaign's ineffectiveness implies the need to overcome many challenges — poor security, lack of capacity to implement education plans and inadequate allocation of resources.

Such dismal education indicators for a militancy-prone region are dangerous for the future when the militants' campaign against education has spread fear among students, their families and teachers.

In 2009, when the Taliban took over Swat and banned girls' education, 900 schools were forcibly closed down. When schools become a soft target and children are terrorised by violent attacks, the effect on enrolment, including teacher recruitment is debilitating for overall education goals.

Civil administrations overseeing education development must realise that rebuilding schools previously razed to the ground is essential as are steps for increasing enrolment, and training teachers.

Also, monitoring the utilisation of education resources is deserving of urgent attention if projects are to be implemented. Consistent government action on education in Fata and KP will serve as a message for groups against education, especially girls' schooling, perceived as promoting Western values.

According to the Global Terrorism Database that looks at over 200 countries, Pakistan tops the list for attacks against educational targets. It is within this context that girls' education has been a particular Taliban target over the past decade.

Consider a dawn.com report on education in Swat's remote Mangor Kot village, north of Mingora. With no provision for girls' middle schools, families have willingly sent their daughters to local boys' schools. That the local administrations in KP and Fata recognise their responsibility towards education provision becomes all the more urgent when there is an overwhelming desire to learn even in dilapidated, roofless schools, and despite traversing mountainous terrain by foot to get to school.

Moreover, when students are provided with secure learning environments, this acts as a reminder that the state is geared to counter radical ideologies, especially where conservatism breeds radical thought and education opportunities are few and not easily accessible.

Published in Dawn, June 8th, 2016

PAT protest

WHEN groups or individuals feel they are not being heard, they often opt for desperate measures. Two years after the killing of 14 workers of Tahirul Qadri's Pakistan Awami Tehreek in an ugly confrontation with police in Lahore's Model Town, PAT says there is no progress in the case.

As reported recently, Dr Qadri has decided to return to Pakistan to observe the second anniversary of the tragedy; his organisation is planning a sit-in on The Mall on June 17 in protest.

The party's machinery has been activated to ensure supporters show up, and knowing Dr Qadri's appeal as a religious leader, participation in the protest may be considerable.

However, while PAT has every right to demonstrate against the killings and demand justice for the murdered individuals, a few things must be realised. Primarily, the welfare of those attending the protest must be considered.

Dr Qadri's protests are known to attract women accompanied by their children, as well as the elderly, and in this stifling heat and the fact that it is Ramazan and many will be fasting, the sit-in will be a true test of endurance.

Even in the best of times, mass protests are difficult affairs to manage; in such oppressive weather, and with the faithful fasting, PAT should perhaps reconsider its options.

Beyond the welfare of the participants, the core concerns driving the protest must be addressed. If critics or opponents of the ruling party feel they cannot get a fair deal from the system, they will take to the streets to vent their frustration.

Therefore, the Punjab administration should reach out to PAT and assure the party that its legitimate grievances will be considered, and that the state will not obstruct the investigation.

Those responsible for the murder of activists in the Model Town tragedy must face justice, no matter how strong their connections with the provincial administration may be.

Statesmanship is required from the Punjab government to defuse a tense situation and reinforce its commitment to justice.

Published in Dawn, June 8th, 2016

US support for India on NSG

TO the average citizen, the Nuclear Suppliers Group may be an obscure organisation of uncertain importance.

But the US-led push to grant India membership of the NSG, a 48-country cartel that oversees international trade in civilian-use nuclear materials with the purpose of ensuring that that trade is not diverted for military purposes, is a destabilising move that could have profound consequences for strategic and nuclear stability in South Asia.

Pakistan’s position is wholly correct: now that both India and Pakistan have formally applied for NSG membership, a criteria-based approach needs to be applied as opposed to a country-specific one. In short, the terms applicable to Indian membership should be the same as those extended to Pakistan.

But the US has made it clear that it is only interested in Indian membership — a position rooted in Washington’s growing convergences with India, but one that ignores the effects that unequal treatment in the global nuclear arena can have on Pakistan.

While proponents and opponents of Indian NSG membership can deploy a range of arguments — technical, pragmatic, and even principled — in support of their respective positions, the destabilising effect of Indian membership needs to be evaluated at two levels: practical and strategic.

Because of the nature of the deal that was struck between India and the US, it is simply the case that India can — whether or not it has thus far chosen to exercise that option — have an advantage over Pakistan when it comes to accumulating nuclear fuel for military purposes.

The Indian denials about the purpose of its fast-reactor breeder programme and the use of indigenous stocks of uranium are beside the point — Pakistan cannot be expected to calibrate its nuclear programme on the basis of Indian statements as opposed to its capabilities.

On the strategic level, NSG membership for India while excluding Pakistan would send a signal that Pakistan cannot expect to be given fair treatment in global governance structures, thus creating reverse incentives for Pakistan to seek collaborative, global solutions in the security arena.

Nevertheless, with Indian membership still likely some way off — the meeting between US President Barack Obama and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not yield a major announcement — Pakistani policymakers must try and avoid the trap of letting unequal treatment of this country spark unreasonable policy choices.

Among the dangers of full-spectrum deterrence that has been officially adopted by Pakistan is the possibility that the nuclear response becomes the default option when faced with a change in the strategic and military equations between Pakistan and India.

More and more nuclear weapons, big and small, are not the answer to Pakistan’s long-term security needs; a more cooperative regional approach is.

If India, the US and a chunk of the international community are heedless to Pakistan’s legitimate security concerns, Pakistan should not automatically rush headlong into an unaffordable arms race with India.

Published in Dawn, June 9th, 2016

Mysterious huddle

THE rumour mill went into overdrive on Tuesday with the news and images of an ‘extraordinary’ meeting between government ministers and the military high command.

Given the context — and paucity of information regarding the substance of the meeting — the images were pored over to examine the body language, and the text of the accompanying press release parsed ad infinitum to get some idea of what the meeting was all about.

Reports from some sources suggest that the discussion revolved around Afghanistan and the peace process under way between the government and Afghan Taliban groups, and that it possibly had a connection with the army chief’s visit to Beijing in May — on a day when Afghanistan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah was also present in the city.

This belief was reinforced by the army chief’s meeting the Chinese ambassador immediately after the session with the government leadership. Beyond that, we are all left guessing at the substance of the conversation, and what was decided.

It is fair to say that whatever is going on regarding Pakistan’s involvement in the peace process in Afghanistan should be more transparent, and efforts should be made to build a wider consensus amongst the democratic leadership before any commitments are made to foreign powers.

And equally importantly, the optics that came out of the meeting only fuelled further chatter about civil-military relations. This is damaging for the conduct of foreign policy and creates ambiguity about who is calling the shots.

The visuals of the meeting and text of the accompanying press release gave the impression that this was less of a discussion and more of a one-way communication of priorities.

The meeting ought to have been held in Islamabad rather than Rawalpindi, so as to not fuel the perception that the government ministers had been ‘summoned’ to GHQ to receive instructions.

If wheels are turning on the foreign policy front it can be potentially self-defeating if the effort should, at the very outset, make the government leadership appear weak and subordinate to the military authorities.

Especially at this delicate time, with the prime minister out of the country and the political situation still not out of the woods, it becomes all the more crucial to ensure that

it is the message of civilian supremacy in the running of the country's affairs that is sent out to the Pakistani public — and the rest of the world.

Published in Dawn, June 9th, 2016

Bangladesh killings

IN the recent past, Bangladesh has seen a notable rise in the number of grisly killings believed to have been carried out by extremist elements.

Police launched a crackdown on Tuesday after the murder of a Hindu priest in one of the country's western districts.

Earlier on Sunday, the wife of a police officer tracing militants and a Christian businessman were killed in different incidents.

In fact, the list of targets is quite extensive, and seems to be expanding. Amongst those who have been killed so far are bloggers and academics, while religious minorities are also in the cross hairs.

Shia, Sufi, Ahmadi and Buddhist individuals or places of worship have all been targeted.

According to the Bangladeshi media, in the last 18 months at least 47 people have been killed. While the state says it is fighting back, critics and rights groups have claimed that the government in Dhaka is not doing enough. For example, Amnesty International has said the killings have created "a climate of impunity", and has urged the authorities to deliver justice.

Pakistan knows the dangers of letting extremism and militancy go unchecked and Bangladesh would do well to address the problem before violence becomes uncontrollable.

Amongst the groups believed to be involved in the bloodshed are Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh as well as local affiliates of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State militant group.

Though the state has largely rejected the presence of Al Qaeda and IS fighters, media reports indicate otherwise.

Some Bangladeshi papers have published extensive information on the militants' actions; it has been revealed that a number of Bangladeshi militants have fought for IS in Syria and have now returned home.

For the Bangladesh government to deny the existence of foreign-linked fighters will not make them go away.

Dhaka needs to redouble its counterterrorism efforts and break the networks of extremists, or else radical elements could seriously harm the fabric of society through their tactics of brutality and violence.

Published in Dawn, June 9th, 2016

Sexism in the NA

THE National Assembly, a representative body whose members are elected by the citizens of Pakistan, is in many ways a microcosm of the country.

On Wednesday however, it manifested one of the worst aspects of our society — that is, the deep vein of sexism that runs through it, constantly undermining women and pushing them to the sidelines.

The occasion was the budget debate in the house when, faced with the opposition's robust response to his claims, Water and Power Minister Khawaja Asif let loose a tirade containing some extremely derogatory remarks against PTI's chief whip Shireen Mazari.

An uproar ensued from the opposition benches who demanded an apology from the minister. However, instead of doing so forthwith, he refused to oblige.

Speaker Ayaz Sadiq intervened but only to suggest that Ms Mazari had 'asked' for it, and that he would expunge the remarks but only if she sat down.

While the minister, the speaker — who deserves censure for reinforcing the blatant misogyny on display — and undoubtedly many others in the Assembly may consider such remarks as being unworthy of second thought, or even as clever ripostes, they are anything but.

Although there has been of late a perceptible lowering of standards in terms of the language used by legislators — with Khawaja Asif a repeat offender on this count — the latest instance is particularly troubling. For it feeds into the narrative which holds that

women do not belong in the public sphere and that those who do venture out are fair game for harassment and abuse.

These are notions with insidious and far-reaching consequences for women's agency and autonomy, particularly with respect to their right to work, vote, choose a life partner, etc.

Even if they are representatives of this chauvinistic society, our legislators have a duty to ensure that they rise above their inherent impulses, instead of irresponsibly perpetuating gender stereotypes.

And that goes for women legislators as well, several of whom on occasion exhibit the tendency to use gender-biased language, a classic example of women themselves internalising prevalent misogynistic rhetoric.

Despite a number of pro-women laws enacted in the last few years, Pakistan's political arena remains unabashedly patriarchal.

This is evident in male politicians' often dismissive attitude towards their female counterparts, not only in the frequently adversarial atmosphere of parliament — as on Wednesday — but also within their own parties.

Moreover, its merits aside, the system of reserved seats for women reinforces the impression that those elected to them are there on the sufferance of men, even though statistical reviews of parliamentary performance show that the former consistently outperform the latter in several respects. Women legislators must work across the aisle to build a united front.

No amount of legislation can substitute for actions that demonstrate respect for women's voices in parliament, not as an indulgence but as a right.

Published in Dawn, June 10th, 2016

Economic outlook

THE recent World Economic Outlook report by the World Bank contains some interesting observations about Pakistan and the regional outlook.

South Asia is the fastest-growing developing region in the world, with a GDP growth rate of 7pc last year.

The decline in oil prices and continued remittance inflows have contributed to this significantly, but, in equal measure, the economies of the region have benefited from their large domestic markets.

They have been held down by common factors such as poor external demand in their export destination countries, poor weather, infrastructure bottlenecks such as energy, and fiscal pressures.

Pakistan has fared well given the overall environment, the report notes. But it adds that "domestic investment remains weak" and the only bright spot in the outlook is the projects under CPEC.

The security situation has indeed improved, but remains a big challenge for the future while the gains from a lower oil price are likely to erode in the medium term, according to the report.

Coming right after the budget, the report is a good reminder that the gains made in recent years are built on weak foundations. For instance, there is indeed a consolidation of the fiscal account, but it is built on the "rolling back of tax exemptions and increases to petroleum and excise taxes".

We know that the amount of revenue mobilised through the former is far smaller than anticipated, and much of the improvement in the fiscal situation is due to additional levies on those within the net, particularly through increased collection from petroleum products.

Likewise, the increase in reserves is due to "increased disbursements from the IMF and other multilateral and bilateral sources".

The risks include "entrenched political obstacles to privatisation" where the authors point out that in Pakistan, revenue targets for the next year assume proceeds from "strategic disinvestments", meaning failure to advance these reforms could have knock-on effects in other areas.

In all areas, the report rightly identifies the sharply magnified possibilities that are open in the South Asian region.

For Pakistan, it lays emphasis on external factors as the main bright spot — falling oil prices, Chinese investments — while highlighting domestic weaknesses, particularly in investment.

This is the right balance to strike when summing up the economic situation in Pakistan.

Economic circumstances are indeed better, but the improvement needs more depth to be sustainable rather than a fleeting phenomenon.

Published in Dawn, June 10th, 2016

Muttahida's travails

THERE are no indications that the MQM's relationship with the establishment is showing signs of improvement. If anything, the party feels it is being unfairly targeted by security forces, particularly the Rangers.

On Tuesday night, Rangers' personnel surrounded the Karachi home of the Muttahida's leader in the National Assembly, Dr Farooq Sattar, apparently in search of a Sindh Assembly member the force suspects is involved in crime.

Dr Sattar has said no criminal is staying at his residence and described the Rangers' actions as 'harassment'. To protest the paramilitary force's methods, the MQM gave a strike call for Wednesday.

But, apart from a few areas of Hyderabad, the strike barely registered, owing largely to a stern warning from the Rangers' high command which helped ensure that Karachi remained open.

This was a far cry from the MQM's strikes of yore, when the metropolis would grind to a halt, mostly out of fear.

Parties have a democratic right to protest and no force should prevent such expressions of dissent.

However, protests must be voluntary and not enforced through flexing muscles, as the Muttahida is prone to doing. With regard to the MQM's complaints of being marginalised, despite the party's past usage of strong-arm tactics, any action against its cadres must be within the ambit of the law; extrajudicial methods are totally unacceptable.

The MQM alleges that 125 of its workers have gone 'missing' while 60 have been killed extrajudicially during the Karachi operation. It also alleges its cadres are being 'forced' to defect to Haqiqi and Mustafa Kamal's Pak Sarzameen Party. Law-enforcement operations in Karachi must bring to justice all elements involved in violence — criminal gangs as well as sectarian, ethnic and political militants — without discrimination.

If the impression is created that only a certain party or group is being targeted, while 'good militants' are left untouched, then no positive long-term results will emerge from the exercise. Law enforcers must also respect fundamental rights while cleaning up Karachi.

Published in Dawn, June 10th, 2016

Slipping Pak-US ties

The rumbles of discontent in the Pak-US relationship are growing once again.

Following the collapse of the Afghan peace talks and the final-year administration of US President Barack Obama determinedly pushing ahead with the deepening of US-India ties, Pakistani policymakers appear to believe that regional developments bode ill for this country's security interests.

Certainly, the Pak-US relationship has been characterised by a contradiction in recent years: while both countries' leaderships have insisted that the relationship is of allies and even strategic in nature, it has been obvious that bilateral ties are essentially transactional in nature.

Now the terms of the transaction appear to be changing, precipitated perhaps by the US that Pakistan is unable to deliver the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table.

With the US firmly in the election cycle, it is unlikely that any major policy change will be considered.

At best, the two US officials making the rounds of Islamabad and, likely, Rawalpindi will be able to balance Pakistani discontent with US disillusionment.

The wider problem will remain, however: how to redefine the Pak-US relationship in a way that is realistic and honest?

There is a tendency inside Pakistani policymaking circles to see more threats than opportunities and to view foreign policy as a zero-sum game with India.

Yet, the very countries that Pakistan is most interested in or concerned by demonstrate a significantly different approach. Competition between the US and China is allegedly driving Great Power realignments, but the US and China remain vital trading partners.

Trade is also a significant aspect of India-China ties, even as India and the US pull closer to counter Chinese influence.

And India is engaging Iran and Saudi Arabia simultaneously, something Pakistan seems unwilling to do. To be sure, Pakistan does have legitimate security concerns, and many of those centre on India's growing military strength.

But a narrow vision of security dominating all other aspects of national power may only leave Pakistan more vulnerable in the regional and international arenas.

Pakistan needs to contribute more positively to the regional order — projects like CPEC and a tentative outreach to Central Asia need to be emphasised in all geographical directions.

It is here where perhaps Pakistan itself, notwithstanding US policy errors, has failed: there is little mention now of trade, investment, remittances or significant cooperation with the US outside the security arena.

With policymakers here apparently not averse to letting bilateral ties be defined almost entirely in security and military terms, the US appears increasingly willing to transfer blame when there are failures on to Pakistan.

Be it the Afghan Taliban or anti-India militants, the US is discarding nuances in its policy approach. A new leader in the White House may well reverse the slide, but Pakistan should not expect that to necessarily occur.

Published in Dawn, June 11th, 2016

Killing women

THE fate suffered by 18-year-old Zeenat Rafiq burnt to death by her own mother for marrying a man of her choice is starkly reflective of our misogynistic societal attitudes.

Without the slightest remorse, her mother justified Zeenat's murder as punishment for 'dishonouring' the family, her siblings even refusing her body for burial.

On Thursday, PPP senators taking note of the killing — the third reported case of a young woman burnt to death in the past three months — urgently demanded that the government fast-track amendments to the Anti-Honour Killings Laws (Criminal Laws Amendment) Bill, 2014, to make 'honour' crimes non-compoundable offences.

It was in the Senate that the anti-honour killings bill had been tabled by former PPP senator Sughra Imam in March 2015.

Then unanimously passed, JUI-F members had shown support. But the bill lapsed before the National Assembly could pass it.

In March 2016, ironically, the same JUI-F representatives rejected the amended bill demanding that clauses allowing aggrieved parties to forgive perpetrators be retained.

In its current form, the bill allows impunity for killers — family members often forgive perpetrators, even forcing prosecutors to drop the most watertight case.

The PML-N government must stop burying its head in the sand and push through an amended bill in a joint parliamentary session.

In February, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif took on the mantle of rights champion, pledging amendments to address loopholes. He must be told that the latest killing is a reminder that delays can prove fatal.

It is unacceptable when women's rights are bartered for political compliancy — several pro-women bills are put into cold storage at the behest of religious parties.

When parliamentary consensus is at the cost of regressive 'advice' from anti-women lobbies such as the Council of Islamic Ideology, the government should resist attempts at outmanoeuvring.

It does not need to be fearful of displeasing the religious lobby; the government does not require their numbers to pass an amended bill through a joint session.

And if incapable of instituting legislative and protective mechanisms, the government should finance the women's ministry and the National Commission on the Status of Women and task them with drawing up mechanisms on gender equality.

Surely NCSW recommendations would be more women-friendly and useful than unsolicited pronouncements by the CII that is armed with Rs100m for its anti-women project.

Like it or not, democratic progress depends on how the state empowers its women.

Published in Dawn, June 11th, 2016

UN under pressure

THE UN is supposed to be a great equaliser, where all the world's nations — from superpowers to city-states — can have their voice heard. But as any realist observer of world affairs is aware, this equality is theoretical as the rich and powerful can often get their way by throwing their weight around at the multinational body.

Take the case of Saudi Arabia that was recently placed on a UN list of those who violate child rights, and then delisted.

The kingdom was on this unenviable list as the coalition it leads in support of the Yemeni government has been accused of killing and injuring a large number of children in that impoverished state's civil war. However, the UN quickly had to back down when Secretary General Ban Ki-moon met with "fierce resistance" from the Saudis and their allies for placing Riyadh on the list.

Reports indicate that apart from the Saudis themselves, a number of Muslim states complained to the secretary general about the matter. The UN chief has described this as "undue pressure".

Apparently, the Saudis and their allies threatened to pull funding from UN programmes which could affect millions of children in Palestine, Syria and Yemen itself. Riyadh and some of the other Gulf states provide millions of dollars in funds to various UN programmes.

These developments indicate that instead of any principles, the international order is very much governed by raw power and chequebook diplomacy.

In the past, Israel was also kept off the UN blacklist, despite its use of brutal force in Gaza, largely due to US pressure.

While the UN blacklist is critical of both Yemeni loyalists and rebels, figures indicate that the Saudi-led coalition was responsible for 60pc of children's deaths in the war in 2015.

It is unfortunate that the UN backed down in the face of threats and intimidation. If those who are supposed to uphold universal humanitarian principles buckle under pressure, what hope is there for the vulnerable of the world?

Published in Dawn, June 11th, 2016

Hillary's nomination

IN one of the toughest, and strangest, American presidential campaigns in memory, a bright spot is the first-ever nomination of a woman as the candidate of one of the two main political parties. Hillary Clinton has smashed the glass ceiling, and that is the singular fact to celebrate from the outcome thus far. Her journey has been an extraordinarily long and difficult one, a fact that testifies to her strength and determination to beat the odds. The race now moves towards the conventions in July, and her numbers at the polls should rise steeply as she emerges as the sole candidate — the Democrat votes, that had thus far been divided between her and Bernie Sanders, are expected to now largely come to her.

The race pits a sophisticated Washington insider against the controversial Republican contester Donald Trump whose campaign has been marked by aggressive rhetoric towards sensitive issues, something that has only served to deepen the divisions in American society. Thus far Ms Clinton has shown considerable mettle in meeting the unconventional challenges posed by Mr Trump, and is refusing to be cowed. As the campaign gathers pace in the run-up to the conventions, and beyond, her strength will be tested to the hilt as she attempts to tap the female vote as a counter to Mr Trump's drive to secure his standing. In the days to come, she will also have to square her hawkish position on Israel and her support for American military adventures in the Middle East with her positions on refugees and immigration, as well as interfaith harmony within the US. Given the sheer magnitude of the challenges faced by the US, its waning power in the world, its crumbling economy and infrastructure at home, and the deep vein of disaffection with the politics of Capitol Hill, Ms Clinton will have to climb a steep and slippery slope to the White House as a conventional, mainstream politician facing unconventional challenges.

Panama impasse

SEVEN rounds of negotiations between the government and the combined opposition over the terms of reference for the Panama Papers judicial commission have yielded an impasse. While another meeting is scheduled, members of both sides in the parliamentary committee appear to be pessimistic about finding common ground. According to the opposition, the government is determined to avoid any inquiry that focuses on Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif alone. According to the government, the opposition has consistently backtracked on its public position and is ultimately seeking a witch-hunt against the prime minister. It is perhaps in the nature of politics for all sides to exaggerate and threaten the collapse of talks. Time and again, an alleged impasse is broken at the last minute and usually with the intervention of the party bosses themselves. With Mr Sharif still out of the country and convalescing, perhaps the government team does not have the authorisation to reach a deal immediately and the opposition is not keen on letting attention turn away from it and towards the slow grind of a judicial commission as yet.

However, there ought to be no doubt: the Panama Papers continue to hang like a dark cloud over the country's politics. True, the government has recovered somewhat and the business of governance has been taken up to an extent, especially with the budget process, but the politics of the Panama Papers is still a clear and major distraction. While the opposition is wrong to the extent that it appears to be uninterested in any systemic change or investigation beyond the first family, the government has been wrong to suggest that the prime minister should be held to the same standard of conduct as everyone else. The Panama Papers continue to reverberate nationally precisely because the prime minister's children have been ensnared in them — to deny that is deeply problematic and, now, politically unacceptable. Given that it is the government that must notify the formation of a judicial commission and it is the leader of the government itself under scrutiny, it is the government that must show both creativity and flexibility to break the impasse.

For the political opposition, the challenge remains to convert the public outcry over the Panama Papers into something meaningful for the overall tax and financial system in the country. If the Panama Papers have yielded prima facie illegalities, the opposition should be working on legislative proposals to close loopholes and improve financial oversight. That process can and should move alongside the judicial commission's work. Sensible legislative action that dovetails with reasonable political discourse is a fundamental way of introducing incremental change in the democratic system. Yet, until now, the opposition has appeared more focused on the politics of the Panama Papers and inflicting damage on the government than fixing the system. Can a better kind of leadership prevail?

Published in Dawn, June 12th, 2016

Derogatory language

IT seems that a competition is under way among our legislators to secure the most marks in the use of derogatory language. Following Minister for Water and Power Khawaja Asif's outburst against PTI chief whip Shireen Mazari in the National Assembly on Thursday, JUI-F Senator Hafiz Hamdullah has sought to overtake the PML-N legislator by launching a tirade of verbal abuse against rights activist Marvi Sirmed on TV. On a pre-recorded talk show aired late Friday night, Senator Hamdullah rudely interrupted Ms Sirmed who was responding to a question on the rise in honour killings and the Council of Islamic Ideology's reaction. Angrily storming off the set, the JUI-F legislator is accused of having attempted to strike Ms Sirmed. Such insupportable behaviour is hardly befitting of the chairperson of the Senate Committee on Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony; not only has the lawmaker brought the august upper house into disrepute, he has also shown his own party in a negative light. Will the Senate and the JUI-F take action against the errant senator, who is reputed to get riled on air?

Regrettably, this incident also underscores the failure of TV channels to fulfil their responsibility of promoting informed debate as opposed to regular marathon catfights. It is unethical for talk shows to knowingly provide a window for the use of expletives. In their bid to boost programme ratings, media owners — and by extension coerced news directors — disregard the electronic media's code of conduct that bans hate speech and incitement to violence. True, freedom of speech is a basic right and all aspects of an argument must be heard, hence the need for invitees holding contrasting viewpoints. However, it is equally important to ensure the wise selection of participants especially when it comes to controversial discussions; the channels are aware that certain guests have a track record of aggressive behaviour on TV. There is no reason whatsoever to discard the rules, even if it is to raise ratings. And in such cases, if the fine imposed by Pemra on channels for violations hasn't served as a deterrent, then the amount should be increased. Since the start of 2016, Pemra has issued 17 show-cause notices for abusive language and irresponsible incitement to violence. Ethical journalism is integral in front of the camera. Only when the current breed of anchors realise their power lies in conducting reasoned debate will they safeguard media credibility.

Published in Dawn, June 12th, 2016

A violent world

A COMPENDIUM of grim statistics stands out in the latest edition of the Global Peace Index, released by the Institute for Economics and Peace recently. The picture that emerges from this study is of a world at war, plagued by conflict and division. While thousands were killed in conflicts last year, the index says 59.5m people were either refugees, IDPs or asylum seekers in 2015 — this is said to be the largest number of displaced people in 60 years. Moreover, apart from the human factor, the economic cost is equally staggering: the index says political instability, terrorism and conflict cost the world economy over $13tr last year. Expectedly, the Middle East and North Africa were the least peaceful parts of the world, while South Asia came in a close second. Pakistan, which is ranked 153 out of 163 states surveyed, is amongst the top five countries with the most terrorist activity, along with Syria, Iraq, Nigeria and Afghanistan.

Faced with such grim figures, it is difficult to be optimistic. With such a large chunk of humanity living under the constant shadow of war, hunger and disease, it is fair to ask what the world community — especially those states that claim to respect humanitarian principles — are doing to address this appalling situation. The sad fact is that whether democracies or autocratic set-ups, most states pay only lip service to humanitarian values, and easily look the other way when pursuing geostrategic aims. The wars in Syria and Yemen are prime examples of how both governments and rebel groups have indulged in atrocities against civilians, while foreign players have stoked the fires by aiding favourites. Differing geopolitical aims have also affected the fight against transnational militant groups. Unless the world community — both the ‘developed’ world and those states directly affected by conflict — pledge to forge a global order that puts humanity over geopolitics, the common good over narrow national and factional interests, these bleak statistics are unlikely to change.

Published in Dawn, June 13th, 2016

Critical choices ahead

A PARLIAMENTARY budget session, a fierce tussle over the terms of reference of a judicial commission, a government under widespread attack for perceived, and real, foreign policy failures — Pakistan is a country once again at the all-too-familiar juncture of both threat and opportunity. Unhappily, the political government, the elected representatives of the majority of the voting public in the country, appears immune to sense or sensibility. Granted, the confused PML-N government is under varied attacks for the political and foreign policy positions it has taken. Ultimately, however, the interests of the republic and the people it represents ought to come first.

Much as the government has made unwise choices on the political front, there remains a wider project and larger goal that none among the political class appear to be aware of. At least so long as political parties are content with national power or settle for provincial autonomy, little change can be expected. One of the unfortunate outcomes of mainstream politics is that, in a week of provincial budget speeches, there is an easy blame game being indulged in. The federal government blames the provincial government for eroding necessary fiscal space, while the provincial governments erode the legitimacy of the federal government by suggesting they are being short-changed. All of those governments, provincial and federal, may well be right, but the outcome is a system that continually seeks to transfer the blame rather than help find systemic solutions. Meanwhile, on the foreign policy front, a familiar round of domestic accusations, denials and recriminations appears to have broken out. Once again, the country and its various leaderships appear more keen on apportioning blame than finding solutions.

If answers, as opposed to questions, are to be placed at the centre of the national discourse once again, certain basic steps will need to be taken. For one, the political government will have to acquiesce to a specific and intrusive investigation that alone will be able to establish that the family of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has neither violated Pakistani laws nor indulged in activities deemed illicit by present-day sensibilities. For another, the PML-N will need to restart a conversation with the army leadership in order to determine which policies have across-the-board institutional support and which organisations can proceed without a constant need to determine boundaries and red lines. It is both facile and convenient to suggest that the country is at a crossroads once again. Surveying the political and strategic landscapes, it is apparent that Pakistan has to make choices that will shape the trajectory of this country for years to come. Whether those choices are for the greater good, helping the maximum number of citizens while negatively impacting the least, or follow old, destructive patterns is a choice for the country to make.

Published in Dawn, June 13th, 2016

Sindh budget

FOR a provincial government still in the process of reaching its revenue potential, it is not a good thing to announce a budget with ‘no new taxes’. The revenue effort announced in the provincial budget is up by an impressive 24pc from last year, and based on existing revenue heads, the provincial government has performed admirably. But there is still a strong need to build those revenue lines with the considerable potential currently lying dormant. The provincial revenue effort is largely built around the general sales tax and an infrastructure maintenance levy of sorts, which together account for 75pc of all provincial tax revenues. Agriculture incomes and property tax, which are two big revenue lines in the provincial domain, as well as the capital value tax on immoveable property, yield a paltry 6pc of the total tax collection in the province. The Sindh government has done a decent job of mobilising revenue since the NFC award and the 18th Amendment, but that effort is basically built on the low-hanging fruit of the provincial GST. It is time to move beyond this if the gains of the last few years are to be sustained. Despite a 24pc increase in the estimates for the next year, the revenue effort appears to be slackening since activating new revenue lines is not taking place.

On the expenditure side, the government claims its budget prioritises ‘poverty alleviation’, but one scrutinises the details in vain for any fresh thinking on this important imperative. Most of the expenditure increases are in the traditional provincial areas of health, education and law and order, with job creation in the police being the top category. A few mega projects for Karachi, totalling Rs10bn, are a welcome development, although the vast majority of those funds will be for roads and flyovers. Compare this with Rs2bn allocated for more important priorities such as water supply and drainage for all major towns and cities of the province. In other areas too, eg sports and youth affairs, the increase in allocation is almost entirely to pay for new construction including stadiums, rather than creating a varsity competition system. Brick-and-mortar development helps fuel rackets and does little to alleviate suffering or poverty. It seems the Sindh government is moving into election mode with its focus on high-visibility projects and development schemes, while the social indicators of the province continue to deteriorate.

Published in Dawn, June 13th, 2016

Orlando shooting

IT is still unclear what caused Omar Mateen, an American of Afghan descent, born and bred in the US, to mow down 50 people at a gay discotheque in Orlando, Florida.

In what has been described as the worst mass shooting in US history, a number of possible motivations and causes have been cited in the media for this crime, including homophobia, ties to Islamist extremists and mental illness.

There are conflicting claims about the suspect's supposedly homophobic tendencies. Reports have also mentioned that Omar Mateen had pledged allegiance to the militant Islamic State group, while the suspect's ex-wife claims he was mentally ill and abusive.

Suspicions about ties to extremism usually emerge in cases where the suspect is Muslim, as Mateen was. Presidential contestant Donald Trump wasted no time playing up his alleged links to religious militancy in a series of almost triumphal tweets declaring: "I told you so."

Whatever conclusions the investigators reach, it is clear that Muslims in America will increasingly feel the heat because of this crime. Unfortunately, the law-abiding majority has to put up with the aftermath of the actions of the militant fringe.

Muslim-Americans had already been feeling uneasy as the couple involved in December's San Bernardino incident belonged to their faith.

The community will have to brace itself for more scrutiny, especially if Muslim-baiters such as Mr Trump have their way, and if the shooter in the Orlando rampage does, in fact, prove to be a home-grown militant.

While a full investigation will reveal whether or not it was extremist tendencies that led the shooter to commit this crime, the fact remains that while the threat of home-grown extremism is real, America has a major gun problem on its hands.

If it is true that the shooter was mentally ill, how was he able to legally purchase deadly firearms?

Unfortunately, over the decades, America has witnessed a long, painful list of horrific gun crimes. While some of the major attacks — Nidal Hasan's rampage at Fort Hood, the San Bernardino killings — did involve Muslim perpetrators, the majority of such gun crimes did not.

The perpetrators have included a wide variety of people, from jobless individuals to high school students, while the victims have included first graders (the Sandy Hook massacre) to university students (Virginia Tech), along with office workers, shoppers, diners etc.

There is indeed a need for America to keep an eye on local extremists who may or may not be linked to transnational outfits such as IS or Al Qaeda. But the US should not avoid the elephant in the room — the easy availability of guns.

The US needs to reconsider its gun laws, especially the Second Amendment, an 18th-century piece of legislation that the gun lobby treats as a mandate from heaven, a law which provides the loopholes for criminals, militants and mentally disturbed individuals to acquire firearms.

Published in Dawn, June 14th, 2016

Punjab budget

PAKISTAN'S largest province, Punjab, has announced a budget that contains few notable features.

To the rest of the country, Punjab appears as a province on the move, with large-scale infrastructure projects unfolding and playing host to some districts with the best social indicators in Pakistan. But a closer look takes some of the shine off this rosy view.

The central task that the provinces are faced with is to increase their revenue effort, following the massive devolution of power and the federal resources upon them after the NFC award and the 18th Amendment to the Constitution.

Although the provincial government has managed to generate some headlines around its revenue effort this year, and has contracted some innovative work to develop a template to increase collections under property taxes, the revenue effort still fails to impress.

Provincial taxes have doubled since 2012, the year before the elections, which on the surface might sound impressive. The amount collected under direct taxes has remained the same since then.

Although collection under capital value tax on immoveable property shows significant increases since 2012, tax on agriculture incomes continues to languish despite a strong pledge by the provincial authorities to tap this revenue line.

More than half the increase in revenue for the next year will come from federal transfers, showing a slackening of the provincial revenue effort.

Given the scale of their ambitions on the expenditure side, this could prove to be quite problematic.

The good news is that the government is boasting an ‘unprecedented’ increase of 70pc in its total allocations for education, the bulk of which is for primary schools.

The usual allocations for ‘schemes’ is not that large, but the package for the agriculture sector is pegged at Rs50bn for next year and consists, predictably enough, of projects such as more roads, the uplift of the irrigation network and flood control.

There is a massive allocation of Rs92bn for the provincial transport infrastructure of which Rs85bn are for the Orange Line metro train, to be financed by a Chinese loan — talk about spending it all in one place.

Transfers to local governments show no appreciable increase from the previous year, despite a pledge that these “will come in place” this year, but without a functioning provincial finance award.

The Punjab budget remains top-heavy and unimaginative with lump allocations for pet projects in particular areas and no significant development on the revenue effort.

Published in Dawn, June 14th, 2016

An intolerant society

IN a month that is meant to reinforce the virtues of forbearance and compassion among Muslims, it is all the more reprehensible when the actions of some in this country demonstrate a distinct lack thereof.

On Friday, a Hindu octogenarian named Gokal Das was set upon by a police constable and his brother in a village in Sindh’s Ghotki district, and viciously beaten for allegedly eating in public during Ramazan. Then on Sunday, a head constable in Lahore reportedly abused and slapped a pastor in church over the ‘misuse’ of loudspeakers during the service despite the cleric saying that only the internal loudspeaker was being used.

Both incidents are a stark illustration of much that has gone wrong with our society ever since the state, for its own ends, began to pander to the extreme right and allowed it — in fact, encouraged it — to peddle a dogmatic interpretation of religion in the country.

The triumphalist narrative that was the inevitable outcome has bred an atmosphere of intolerance and moral vigilantism.

So, while the Ehteram-i-Ramazan Ordinance 1981 — when it spells out the penalty for eating, drinking or smoking in public during this month — specifically refers to those "who, according to the tenets of Islam, [are] under an obligation to fast…", minorities risk incurring public wrath if they do not comply as well.

And it is not only good sense that is missing in society: given that the victim in the first instance was also an elderly gentleman, so is the quality of compassion.

Meanwhile, the incident in Lahore also highlights how the constitutional right to freedom of religion in Pakistan can be violated on frivolous pretexts and the contempt shown towards figures representing minority faiths even by those who should be cognisant of the law.

When those belonging to minority communities are forced to order their lives in a manner so as to give least 'offence' to the majority, the latter must question how well they represent the values that their faith enjoins upon them.

Published in Dawn, June 14th, 2016

Fata reforms

THE work of the Fata Reforms Committee appears to be reaching a conclusion with a historic set of proposals likely to be submitted to the prime minister upon his return from surgery abroad.

As reported in this newspaper, the five-member committee headed by foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz will make a comprehensive set of political, administrative, judicial and security proposals for Fata that, along with rehabilitation and resettlement work in the affected areas, may finally give the denizens of the tribal areas a future they can look forward to.

The capstone of the proposals is likely to be the recommendation that Fata eventually be merged with KP — a position that appears to have some support among the political leadership of Fata, but that remains untested among the people of KP.

While the country's north-western province already has considerable economic and social connectivity with Fata and is ethnically similar, it is known that non-Pakhtun communities have some reservations about the merger.

None of those problems, however, are fundamentally insurmountable; what will be required is an inclusive decision-making process that is sensitive to the legitimate needs and concerns of all communities.

Necessary and long overdue as Fata reforms are, it is by no means certain the latest phase will, in fact, result in far-reaching change.

Fata reforms have been mooted in the past, only for the wheels of the state to fail to turn when it came to implementation. In the current phase, the political and military leadership do appear to be working together, giving hope that change is imminent, though it should be noted that the political leadership appears to be following the overall direction of change sought by the military rather than the other way round.

Well-intentioned about change in Fata as the military leadership may be, political and social changes shepherded by a security-oriented institution can lead to lopsided outcomes.

Fata does not just need to be normalised; it needs to overcome the collective experience and legacies of the British Raj and the post-Independence Pakistani state.

The reforms committee's proposals should, therefore, be subjected to thorough vetting by a wide-ranging group of stakeholders. Fata, and the rest of Pakistan, cannot afford the bungling of the reforms process.

There also remains a concern that is significant, but for institutional reasons often left unmentioned.

Army chief Gen Raheel Sharif has made Operation Zarb-i-Azb, North Waziristan, border management and Fata generally a priority of his tenure. That tenure is now into its last months. Will the person who succeeds Gen Sharif bring the same energy, determination and focus to the task?

The military prides itself on institutional continuity of policy and action, but comprehensive Fata reforms is such a complex, expansive task that it will require the sustained attention of the successor of the army chief.

KP budget

OUT of all the provincial governments, it is perhaps KP that holds the most interest. This the testing ground of the PTI which bills itself as a party of change.

In KP's budgets, the party's commitment to its manifesto and its promises stand tested. There could scarcely be a more challenging testing ground.

The province is on the front line of the war on terror, and its geography puts it on the front line of climate change as well.

Given these challenges, the PTI has performed better than many expected in its core economic responsibilities. It has doubled provincial revenue collection during its term and invested in unusual, out-of-the-box revenue measures tapping its considerable forest resources and urban government land, which appears to have paid off even if the steps fell short of target.

It has made increasing forest cover an important priority, something the other provinces ought to emulate. It has moved further towards empowering local governments, although the politics of status quo has asserted itself here.

In its last full-year budget, the party appears to show some signs of fatigue. It brought about dramatic increases in the collection of agricultural income tax, tripling revenue from this head in three years, but that has now tapered off.

The story is the same with tax on immoveable property, where many rackets can be observed.

The party sought to double total provincial taxes this year, but in revised figures they have brought that target down by almost a third.

Next year's target is around 30pc higher than this year, meaning the aggressive drive to transform the provincial revenue machinery has not petered out. Fatigue is also evident on the expenditure side.

Although most expenditure targets were met last year, education suffered a shortfall of almost 46pc, and next year's education target, from current revenue expenditure, has been brought down by 31pc, probably to align it more with reality, making KP the only province thus far to actually reduce its education allocation (on the current revenue account) from last year.

Nevertheless, KP is one province where interesting things have happened in terms of economic management, where something vital is stirring. Whether or not the provincial leadership feels fatigued, they can at least claim they put up a spirited show during their term in office.

Published in Dawn, June 15th, 2016

Divisive rhetoric

A FRIGHTENED public can be gullible and unthinking. Therein lies the danger posed by Donald Trump's facile and uninformed stance on complex issues pertaining to diversity, integration and immigration.

The fact that the perpetrator of the carnage in Orlando on Saturday was a Muslim of Afghan descent is a godsend for the presidential candidate, and one that he can use to spin out ever more outrageous pronouncements and 'policy' statements, notwithstanding their tenuous link to logic or reality.

And that is precisely what Mr Trump proceeded to do in his incendiary speech on Monday in which he dwelt upon how he would, if elected, deal with what he seems to consider an existential threat to the US from radical Islam.

Among other measures, he dilated upon his intention to ban Muslims from entering the US, called for what amounts to their racial profiling, and alleged that the Muslim community in the US was deliberately harbouring radicalised individuals within.

In today's polarised world, xenophobia and scapegoating can be easily projected by vested interests as 'patriotism' and 'self-protection'.

Thus in the hands of demagogues for whom the end justifies the means, it becomes possible to ignore the obvious: that the Orlando killer was American-born, not an immigrant; that virtually none of the alarmingly frequent mass shootings in the US have been perpetrated by Muslims; that the Muslim community in that country is by and large well-integrated and overwhelmingly law-abiding.

Or, for that matter, that Omar Mateen's faith perhaps had less to do with his actions than the shockingly lax gun laws in the States that allow even mentally unstable individuals to acquire deadly weapons.

Mr Trump's divisive rhetoric, that encourages discrimination against an entire community, can only fuel alienation and further violence.

Moreover, by allowing their fears to be manipulated in this manner, the American people are turning their backs on the history of their land, so profoundly shaped by migrants — the "huddled masses" of yore who were once welcome on its shores.

Published in Dawn, June 15th, 2016

Torkham hostilities

The exchange of fire between the border security personnel of Afghanistan and Pakistan at the Torkham crossing was an eruption that needed to be quelled quickly by both sides and that must be handled sensibly if it recurs.

Border management and overall tensions in the Pak-Afghan relationship appear to be driving the two sides apart at the moment.

Tensions in Torkham began with a Pakistani decision to finally go ahead with new border-control measures that involved new fencing on either side of the crossing and gates to regulate the flow of people and vehicular traffic.

Initial tensions, which led to the closure of the border crossing several weeks ago, appeared to have been resolved, causing the Pakistani side to resume work on the new infrastructure that will be used at the crossing.

However, the resumption of construction elicited a military response from the Afghans — a response that Pakistani officials have credibly suggested was rooted in growing Afghan hostility towards Pakistan and political divisions in Kabul.

Driving the Afghan government's animosity is certainly the collapse of the yet-to-begin peace process with the Afghan Taliban and the perception in some quarters there that Pakistan is aiding the fighters more than it is trying to help Kabul stabilise the country. But there are also rival political camps at work, with former president Hamid Karzai leading a group of dissidents who appear to want the state to declare Pakistan an enemy rather than a partner or an ally of Afghanistan.

According to Pakistani officials, following the eruption of tensions at Torkham late last month, there was an effort made to once again seek Afghanistan's cooperation and assent in the border-management plans that the Pakistani security establishment is promoting.

The controversial handover to Afghanistan of a check post in Angoor Adda appears to have been a part of Pakistan efforts to find collaborative and constructive solutions to border-management issues.

Yet, what one part of the Afghan government agrees to, another often tries to undermine — leading to the violence at Torkham that left several people dead this week.

Military conflict cannot and must not be the answer. What Pakistan needs to do is redouble its military, diplomatic and political outreach to Afghanistan and find urgent and durable solutions. Is Afghanistan fundamentally opposed to border management?

Are Afghan officials willing to use anything, even scupper sensible ideas, to express their annoyance with Pakistan over the stalled peace process?

Should intra-Afghan political rivalries be allowed to spill over into the wider Pak-Afghan relationship?

The Afghan leadership has many questions to answer at the moment. What Pakistani officials should refrain from, however, is responding in the same manner.

Pugnacious and aggressive statements by Pakistani leaders are unhelpful and unnecessary.

Common sense can prevail again — if leaders on both sides act to calm rather than stoke tensions.

Published in Dawn, June 16th, 2016

Missing NCSW

THE recent spate of anti-women practices, including ‘honour’ killings, has underscored once more the need for the government to harness all its tools to prioritise the protection of women.

Unfortunately, a key body, the National Commission on the Status of Women, tasked with furthering the rights of women, has been conspicuous by its absence.

A constitutional body with executive autonomy, the NCSW has been devoid of a chairperson for the past six months. With the three-year tenure of the last chair having expired in December 2015, PML-N minister Saira Afzal Tarar briefly took over as acting head.

While Ms Tarar remained the chair for one month, the stipulated period of her incumbency has now lapsed and the position remains to be filled.

If the NCSW is to function effectively, the government must appoint a new chairperson — an independent, apolitical women’s rights champion.

It is imperative that the prime minister and leader of the opposition select, as soon as possible, three shortlisted candidates, whose names must then be forwarded to a parliamentary committee for the final selection.

Deprived of a chair, the NCSW was able to spend only a part of its annual budgetary allocation of Rs78m.

True, the NCSW can only make recommendations, but in the past it has acted as a relentless catalyst for change by confronting widespread gender inequalities; reporting on violations, monitoring progress on the government’s international commitments and publicly outlining legislative amendments.

Meanwhile, the revival of provincial women’s commissions would also boost efforts at women’s empowerment and protection.

In this, the Punjab commission, or PCSW, has already set the right tone by coming up with the first Gender Parity Report based on gender equality data identifying areas of focus and possible government interventions.

While the progress of the Punjab commission on advocacy for women’s rights is praiseworthy, some other provincial governments, notably Sindh and Balochistan, must begin by prioritising the formation of functional women’s commissions.

The Sindh Commission on the Status of Women Act 2015 simply exists on paper.

In this, the revival of the NSCW would be invaluable to provide direction and for coordination on legislative and policy matters.

It is about time that the rulers understood the importance of empowering women's commissions, and supporting and building on their work, given their potential for advocacy, research and dispensing valuable advice for pro-women legislation.

Published in Dawn, June 16th, 2016

RLNG terms

IF the recommendations of Ogra, the oil and gas sector regulator, can be so easily brushed aside by a forum like the Economic Coordination Committee, then one may well wonder why we bother having regulators in the first place.

The ECC is not some apex policymaking body and its powers to override the regulator's recommendation should be used sparingly and in extreme circumstances. But that is not what happened during the last ECC meeting on Tuesday, when four of Ogra's determinations with regard to pricing of various components of Regasified Liquefied Natural Gas were overturned.

The ECC simply told Ogra to allow higher terminal charges, a higher standard for passing through cost of gas losses to consumers, a charge applied by the Sui Southern Gas Company and a cess by the Sindh government.

It is hard to attach a rupee cost to the increase in the price of RLNG that will result, but it is safe to say that the hike will be substantial.

What is perplexing about this is how late it is happening in the entire RLNG saga. These matters ought to have been sorted out more than a year ago, and certainly long before the gas started to flow.

Having announced with great jubilation that they have arranged for additional gas supplies for the country at the cheapest rates, the government is now making dubious use of the powers of the ECC to cause the price to creep upwards by a significant margin.

The consequences will be felt by industry and consumers alike — they are basically being told that the benefits of the cheaper fuel do not belong to them. The finance minister, who presided over the ECC meeting where the decisions were made, should be asked to furnish further details about the need to override Ogra.

Parliament is the right forum to raise these questions. Specifically, the minister should be asked to provide an estimate of the impact that these decisions will have on end-use price.

Published in Dawn, June 16th, 2016

The operation two years on

TAKING the fight to the militants in North Waziristan was an essential and non-negotiable requirement for internal stability in Pakistan.

Two years on, many of the effects can be seen and felt across the country — Pakistan is, both by statistical and psychological yardsticks, significantly more stable and calmer than it was before Operation Zarb-i-Azb.

Some years ago, no national holiday or religious occasion could pass without a great deal of trepidation and fear — such was the impact of the banned TTP's campaign of terror. And rare was the month where an attack of distressing proportions did not take place.

Indeed, it was the infamous Karachi airport attack that triggered the formal launch of Operation Zarb-i-Azb.

Two years on, the sacrifices of the 390 soldiers who have lost their lives and the many more that have been injured in the campaign deserve to be put front and centre — truly, it is their blood that has helped to save Pakistan, and the nation owes the soldiers on the frontline a debt of gratitude.

It is the nature of counter-insurgencies, however, to move in a phased manner from reclaiming territory to establishing true and familiar normality.

Today, it is at the policy level where the big questions remain, the soldiers on the battlefield having done, and continuing to do, all that has been asked of them.

The military leadership has indicated its preferred course of action: counterterrorism operations across the country and improving border management on the Pak-Afghan border.

The military leadership, as evidenced by DG ISPR Gen Asim Bajwa's news conference on Wednesday, has also indicated where it considers the political government to be falling behind in its commitments to implement the National Action Plan.

Prima facie the political government does appear to not be taking the fight against militancy seriously. From failing to launch a major crackdown in Punjab to thwarting the military from launching an operation of its own, and from failing to develop civilian counterterrorism platforms to appearing happy to claim political credit for military gains, the PML-N government has fared quite poorly in its internal security responsibilities.

Yet, there are at least two other parts to the story of civilian failure and military success. One, the military leadership's focus on NAP is also selective — anti-state militants are being fought, while anti-Afghan or anti-India militants continue to thrive on Pakistani soil.

Surely, the fight against militancy will never be one until there is a clear and evident policy against all militant groups. Two, the military leadership's criticisms ignore the reality of the civil-military dynamic in Pakistan.

Neither shaming nor intimidating the political leadership will achieve much more than an even greater civil-military divide. If the goal is truly a stable Pakistan, the solution lies only in institutional cooperation according to the constitutional scheme of things.

Published in Dawn, June 17th, 2016

Stock market jubilation

THE re-entry of Pakistan's stock markets in the Emerging Markets classification has sent stocks on a steep upward climb and stoked hopes of large-scale foreign investor interest in the near future. But it is worth remembering that the upgrade by itself will not mean much in the absence of reforms to strengthen the capacities of the main capital market regulators.

One thing that the Shamim Ahmed Khan report made very clear was the series of bad choices by the board of the Karachi Stock Exchange in the months leading up to the fateful decision to impose a floor on the stock market in August 2008.

It was in the aftermath of that event that Pakistan was suspended from the MSCI index, then later admitted under a Frontier Market classification.

It is only now after eight years that it has returned to its Emerging Market status.

Decision-making at the board was constrained by a number of factors: too many brokers on the board created a powerful conflict of interest, and the poor quality of data and analysis helped fuel wishful thinking in the responses that were crafted to the series of problems that came up with increasing speed from May 2008 onwards.

Many of those weaknesses have been addressed, but quite a few key ones remain.

The power of brokers to engineer the rise and fall of individual stocks has not abated, and the power of the regulator to prevent such abuses has not increased appreciably, in spite of the reforms instituted since then.

The consequences of that catastrophic period are only now beginning to recede.

In order to be assured that the return to the original classification as an Emerging Market lives up to its promise, it will be necessary to continue strengthening the regulators to monitor and prevent abusive trading practices, as well as punish those who play recklessly with the money entrusted by the public to their care.

The broker community and the government are entitled to their sense of jubilation at the new development, and foreign investors are undoubtedly going to view the country's capital markets with renewed favour because of it.

However, one should also remember that the goal is not simply to restart foreign portfolio inflows, but also to ensure that mistakes of the past are not repeated. The best way to do this is through institutional reform and limiting the influence of the brokers with the regulators.

Published in Dawn, June 17th, 2016

Obama's outreach

IN times of peril, it is not unusual for those in power — or those seeking it — to resort to demagoguery and scare-mongering.

The usual targets are minority communities or ostracised groups, which make for easy prey due to their supposed 'otherness'.

A classic example of this sort of behaviour came in the aftermath of the recent Orlando rampage, with Republican presumptive presidential contender Donald Trump demonising the whole Muslim community for the crime of one individual.

In fact, Mr Trump has, throughout his campaign, taken aim at Muslims (and others, such as Mexicans) in an effort to appeal to the lowest common denominator. However, as opposed to this divisive trumpery, US President Obama has taken a bold, inclusive stance, following the massacre in Florida.

While speaking during a nationally televised broadcast recently, the US president said that Muslims should not be made to feel that "the West hates them" or that the US government is betraying them.

Mr Obama added that in the past, out of fear, the American government had ostracised citizens, which he considered "shameful". Mr Trump responded to this statesmanship by declaring Obama "a lousy president".

Indeed, in the aftermath of acts of terrorism or mass violence, what public figures say has a great deal of influence. There are reports of Muslims experiencing verbal abuse in Florida after the club shooting.

When public figures engage in verbally bashing minorities or groups, bigots in society are given the green signal to go after vulnerable groups. History has seen this scenario play itself out countless times.

We in Pakistan have also witnessed whole communities hounded because of offences — real or perceived — committed by individuals. Conversely, when leaders respond in measured tones, it sends the message that while the guilty shall be brought to justice, entire communities will not be ostracised.

In the current global climate of hate, intolerance and terror, it is the latter message that must be highlighted, particularly by those in positions of power and influence.

Published in Dawn, June 17th, 2016

Weather warning system

THE best way to prepare for a flood is to develop an early warning system. Thus far, the Pakistan Meteorological Department has been able to give the country only 48 hours' notice of an extreme weather event, making it next to impossible for the authorities to mobilise a flood protection plan and evacuate residents from the path of a fast-approaching deluge.

In many cases, given the growing frequency of freak weather events, no notice has been given at all — as in the case of the tornado in Peshawar last year, or the glacial lake outburst floods triggered by a torrential downpour in Chitral, or the ferocious winds that suddenly hit the cities of Islamabad and Nowshera in early June.

This is not the Met department's fault. Since the great floods of 2010, Met officials have been trying to convey to the government that it must take its job of upgrading the country's early warning system seriously.

Nothing has been done since getting the PC-1 approved in 2010 for a large project to instal new weather radars and increase the number of observatories. Clearly, not many in government think it is worth their while to pay any attention to such a project.

Instead, most of our development budgets in the years following 2010 have prioritised brick-and-mortar construction projects including roads and highways.

The authorities have disregarded the fact that the country has continued to be battered by floods that, between them, have displaced millions of people and wreaked destruction to the tune of billions of dollars.

The destruction from the 2010 floods alone was estimated at beyond $10bn, larger than the size of the IMF loan the country had acquired only a few years earlier.

Despite this, the Met department is being asked to depend on a network of weather radars that are obsolete and in some cases dysfunctional.

Freak events, including the devastating floods in Chitral last year, have been beyond the range of the country's weather radars, making it impossible to forecast and alert local populations to the approaching danger.

Considering Pakistan ends up asking for international assistance in the aftermath of every flood, it is extremely shameful that the government has not moved on to the Rs6bn radar early warning system that the Met department has been urging it to do since 2010 — this approach seems to have more to do with skewed priorities than lack of funds.

Even if the government were to immediately start upgrading its weather radars to make the forecasting system fit for an era of climate change and extreme weather events, the system could not be made operational before 2019.

How many more floods and other freak weather events would we have endured by then? How much more monetary damage and loss of life? Nobody in government seems to care.

Published in Dawn, June 18th, 2016

ECP membership

THE prime minister's surgery may have been an unforeseen event that has disrupted the schedule of governance. But all other events surrounding the simultaneous — and scheduled — retirement of the four ECP members, one from each of the four provinces, was entirely foreseen.

Yet, virtually no effort was made to ensure that the ECP did not suffer from four-fifths of its membership being vacant, so that now by-elections and indirect local government elections have been postponed in various parts of the country.

True, parliament did finally take up the issue of allowing a wider pool of candidates than simply retired justices of the superior judiciary, or candidates eligible to be members of the superior judiciary, as envisaged under the 18th and 20th Amendments.

But the 22nd Amendment itself came quite late in the day, with the National Assembly hurriedly passing the bill only two weeks before the ECP members' terms were to expire.

The manner in which parliamentary and executive affairs continue to be managed by the government suggests less a coherent strategy and more an increasing reliance on ad hocism and piecemeal solutions.

Consider that even as a parliamentary committee begins its work of selecting new ECP members from a pool of nominees to be referred to it, the issue of electoral reforms appears to have been returned to the back-burner.

The ECP members who will eventually be selected — if only because it's in the interest of all political parties to fill the seats of elected representatives — will only be as effective as the powers they have.

Some of the ECP's influence will be down to the leadership and dynamism of the members selected, but they must work within an overall electoral framework that is quite flawed.

Without comprehensive electoral reforms, the ECP will, in many instances, have its hands tied, which is the opposite of what a progressively improved electoral system ought to look like.

The problem is a familiar one: the political class finds it easier to pass legislation, a process shepherded by a few experienced hands in parliament, than to focus on institution building.

The evolved ECP will likely be an improvement on its predecessors, but the pace and intensity of change is unsatisfactory.

Contrast the efforts on electoral reforms with the intensity of negotiations over the terms of reference for the Panama Papers inquiry. The political class is falling behind the demand for reforms by the public it represents.

Published in Dawn, June 18th, 2016

Atrocities against Yazidis

THE UN investigative report on Syria and Iraq titled, They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against Yazidis has etched an appalling picture of the atrocities perpetrated by the militant Islamic State group on one of the Middle East's most vulnerable communities.

The report that recognises the militants' barbaric actions as genocide, crimes against humanity, and other war crimes, documents the testimonies of Yazidi women, thousands of whom were enslaved after IS fighters took control of their villages in northwest Iraq in August 2014.

Many among them, including women and children, were taken across into Syria and sold as sex slaves. Some 3,200 Yazidi women and children still remain in the grip of IS fighters, known to systematically rape girls and sell women at slave markets.

Citing evidence gathered in interviews, the report accuses IS of erasing the Yazidis' identity.

It is unfortunate that as states, globally, vie for influence in Syria, the voices of the ordinary people whose lives have been shattered by the war in the Middle East is drowned out.

This is especially so in the case of smaller communities, who are powerless in the face of an advancing enemy, determined to capture and kill on the basis of religion and sect.

The UN has done the right thing by drawing attention to the plight of the hapless Yazidi community. But how will it proceed given that the world body is composed of member states that have their own agendas when it comes to the Middle East?

Building a legal case against the perpetrators by asking the UN Security Council to send cases to the International Criminal Court or ad hoc tribunals might be essential for justice for the survivors, but will the states concerned comply?

Indeed, previous attempts to refer Syrian war crimes to the ICC have been thwarted. The solution to the Yazidis' predicament, and to that of many communities in Syria and Iraq, lies in a negotiated peace where all parties place the interests of the ordinary people above their own.

Published in Dawn, June 18th, 2016

Economic inheritances

FOR any government to have to invoke its economic inheritance in the twilight of its term is in part an admission of failure. Finance Minister Ishaq Dar began his term in 2013 by saying he was "inheriting a broken economy", and this week during the budget debate, he once again invoked past regimes that had "ruined the national economy". He is not alone in referring to his inheritance in this manner. The previous PPP government also invoked its inheritance during its final years in power, although there was probably greater justification for doing so at that time since the scale of the crisis that was passed on to it was of an order of magnitude beyond what Mr Dar picked up in 2013. When framing one's departing narrative, it is natural for a government to refer to its inheritance and remind the country of all that it has accomplished. But Mr Dar is not framing his departing narrative just yet. This is a crucial year of delivery for him and his focus should remain on what parts of his agenda remain to be implemented and how that job will be done given the tight timelines from here on.

But since he has brought up the topic of what he inherited, it is worth asking how bad it really was. The worst situation the incoming government faced in 2013 was in the declining reserves and skyrocketing circular debt that had completely choked the power sector. Beyond this, the financial markets were functioning normally, large-scale capital flight was not under way, and an armed militia was not banging on the doors of Islamabad. Compared to the situation in 2008, this was a rather rosy state of affairs. All it really took was a massive dousing of government funds on the circular debt to jump-start the power sector, and approaching the IMF to rebuild reserves. That act of paying off the circular debt in one large payment of almost half a trillion rupees was cleverly done in the closing days of the 2013 fiscal year, allowing Mr Dar to claim that he reduced the deficit from 8.3pc of GDP to 4.3pc.

In the same session of the National Assembly where he tried to remind us of the legacy of the Musharraf and PPP governments, Mr Dar went on to claim that the future was bright because of CPEC. His invocation of the past could be overlooked if he had more than roads, highways and Chinese power plants to offer. Fact is this government has proved intellectually bankrupt and, driven by a few obsessions — the exchange rate, brick-and-mortar development projects, Chinese investment — has left the wellsprings of our future prosperity to their own devices. Mr Dar would be well advised to keep his focus on his current obligations and responsibilities to the future. The past can wait.

Published in Dawn, June 19th, 2016

Video ‘confessions’

THE recorded ‘confession’ leaked to the news media and played breathlessly on TV news channels and shared furiously on social media appears to be here to stay. It is a dangerous, unwelcome and likely an illegal development — but few in the state apparatus or the news media appear to care. The identities of individuals whose recorded interrogations have made their way into the public domain tell a story of their own: Saulat Mirza, Khalid Shamim, Asim Hussain and Minhaj Qazi. All affiliated with political parties and all whose statements are meant to discredit the very apex of the leaderships of those parties. In this democratic era, the state apparatus — perhaps in this instance led by the military, but seemingly with the complicity of parts of the political government — has pioneered a thoroughly undemocratic technique to try and undermine the legitimacy of a section of the political class. Quite why the collective resource of the state involved in the Karachi operation cannot assemble investigative and prosecutorial teams that can ensure by-the-book convictions of allegedly patently guilty criminals is

unknown — or at least those involved in the making of such decisions do not appear to consider it important to inform the public.

What is clear is that the practice needs to cease immediately. Farcical trials by public opinion could unleash effects that are both hard to predict and difficult to control. Clearly, the MQM and its leadership have serious questions to answer — no sensible denizen of Karachi can possibly believe the party has always stayed on the right side of the law. Similarly, the allegations of corruption in PPP ranks are so legion and so persistent that it is surely the case that the PPP leadership, especially party and public officials in Sindh, need to be thoroughly scrutinised by accountability bodies. But the allegations of crimes by the MQM and PPP cannot automatically become evidence of the existence of those crimes — at least not as far as the state is concerned. It is triply dangerous when it comes to political leaders because individual rights, the political process and the democratic system itself are imperilled when evidence that may have been collected under duress and under unlawful threat is tossed into the public domain as proven fact. Having failed to find kangaroo courts, the search appears to be on for kangaroo justice. The lawful elements of the state need to assert what is right here.

Published in Dawn, June 19th, 2016

Gujarat verdict

A CONTROVERSIAL judgement relating to the 2002 riots in the Indian state of Gujarat has resulted in protests that threaten to grow louder. The case focused on the violence which left 69 Muslims dead in just one Ahmedabad locality (Gulberg Society) on Feb 28, 2002. Disbelief was expressed when only 24 of the 60 accused were found guilty. Of the 24 found guilty, 11 have been sentenced for life while 13 are deemed to have 'escaped' with lenient sentences by those who had been doggedly pursuing the case over the years. One of the main objectives of the campaigners was to demonstrate how Mr Narendra Modi, then chief minister of Gujarat, was linked to the massacre which had come in reaction to the Godhra train attack a day earlier. The train attack was blamed on Muslims, and led to frenzied Hindu mobs going on a killing spree in an act of revenge.

Over time, those who have demanded justice for the victims have faced all forms of harassment. A vilification effort against those on the complainants' side, not dissimilar to the one that rights activists in Pakistan are often subjected to, has been on for quite some time. However, what appears to have hurt the victims' families and their supporters most now is an assertion in the new ruling that holds one of the well-known Muslims among those killed on that dark February day responsible for angering the crowd which resulted in its going on a rampage. Ehsan Jafri, an ex-Congress MP whose family has been at the

forefront of the case, was blamed for inviting the ire of the mob by firing on it — with evidence indicating events to the contrary being rejected. The ruling is just a routine reminder to pursuers of justice in India and elsewhere that once a few individuals decide to take up the cudgels on behalf of those who are less in number and who have little clout the fight becomes a never-ending one.

Published in Dawn, June 19th, 2016

Bombing Syria

MORE than 50 US State Department officials have come up with a dangerous suggestion to end the brutal Syrian civil war and defeat the militant Islamic State group: unleash more violence, specifically a US-led effort to topple Bashar al-Assad's regime. An internal cable made public on Friday revealed that the staffers want "targeted military strikes" to force Mr Assad to come to terms. This is not the first call for regime change in Damascus. Many in capitals both Western and Arab have been beating the war drums, calling for the Syrian strongman's forced ouster, ever since the civil war broke out in 2011. Interestingly, the call from within the State Department coincided with the visit of Saudi deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to Washington. The Saudis reinforced their demand for air strikes against the Syrian regime. Though Barack Obama has supported regime change in Syria, he has stopped short of actually using US military force to overthrow the Damascus government. Obviously, the US president's cautious approach — in stark contrast to the gunboat diplomacy of his immediate predecessor — has not gone down well with many in the US foreign policy establishment.

Not only are the dissenting voices publicly critical of Mr Obama's Syria policy, coming from the State Department they may also be a message to the next incumbent of the White House. For example, Hillary Clinton, the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate, has indicated she would not be averse to deploying US military muscle in Syria. Yet, the thought of the US toppling another Arab regime is disturbing, especially when we see the disasters that have unfolded in Iraq and Libya — two shattered states where the regime change theory was championed with much zeal by many in the West. Instead of pacifying Syria, bombing the Assad regime will likely result in transforming a civil war with limited spillover into a regional conflagration. It is highly unlikely that Russia and Iran, Mr Assad's principal foreign backers, will let their ally be bombed into submission. Mr Obama has done well to resist the shrill calls of the pro-war lobby in Washington; it is hoped his successor will follow a similarly measured approach. Instead of changing the regime in Damascus by force, a much better alternative would be for the foreign backers of all of Syria's factions to use their clout to push for a negotiated settlement. At this point, it seems foreign forces have no such intentions.

Funds and transparency

SECRET funds of government departments — opaque, unaudited, discretionary and historically prone to abuse — has been a commendable area in which the government has tried to impose a degree of rationality and discipline. As told by Finance Minister Ishaq Dar in parliament over the weekend, the PML-N government scrapped 32 of the 34 secret funds it inherited and has left just two in place, one each for the ISI and the IB. The finance minister also claimed that an audit process is in place to ensure that those two secret funds are properly utilised. There are, however, at least two sets of questions that need to be asked.

First, what is the size and general purpose, in policy terms as stipulated by the law, of the continuing two funds and how does the audit process work? Weak oversight or rules that allow exemptions from meaningful audit can undermine the claim of Mr Dar that a satisfactory audit process is in place. If the state does not need to shield certain specific activities from the public gaze, the parameters of those activities should be clearly defined. Moreover, expenditure incurred under those charges should be adequately scrutinised – not just glibly claimed to be adequately scrutinised. It may sound fanciful: with the civil-military imbalance once again heavily skewed and a political government that is not entirely scrupulous about its adherence to rules when it comes to mixing party politics and state resources. But it is precisely through rules that institutions are developed and progressively made accountable. It took the sustained interest and intrusion of the superior judiciary in the last parliament for secrets funds to become enough of a political issue for the PML-N to act swiftly in the beginning of the current parliament. Change is not only necessary, but is possible.

The other set of questions surrounds parliamentary scrutiny of overall spending by the executive. Specifically, the Public Accounts Committee — what has become of it? Compromised by a lack of enforceable sanctions and seemingly a lack of interest on the part of the members themselves, the committee has drifted towards irrelevance. Just last week the PAC members registered their protest when the FBR chairman did not appear before the committee. But all the committee could do was to postpone its meeting and seek the speaker of the National Assembly's intervention to compel the FBR chairman to appear before the PAC. The Senate, perhaps spurred by the PAC's feebleness and seeking to enhance its own role in financial oversight of the executive, is seeking to create its own public accounts committee. A role for the Senate may be helpful, but it is the National Assembly's PAC that must be revitalised. Duplication will not ensure institutional strengthening.

Published in Dawn, June 20th, 2016

PCB's coming of age

The new dispensation at the Pakistan Cricket Board has made swift moves to show it means business.

For too long, the PCB had been claiming that it was the best administrative set-up in sport because it was the biggest and the richest.

Instead, what we saw was the downward spiral of the national cricket team over the years.

But now, in a rare show of maturity, the cricket board has embarked on a series of measures that could give a much-needed boost to the sagging fortunes of the game in Pakistan.

The most important measure is, of course, the PCB's welcome break from the dominant lobbies that for long had influenced its workings.

The quarters that for over a decade manoeuvred appointments of the coach and captain, team selection, tour schedules, players' conduct, etc have finally been dispensed with, and the improvement is evident.

Young Sarfraz Ahmed's induction as T20 skipper in place of a spent Shahid Afridi, the appointment of Inzamam-ul-Haq and his selection panel, the hiring of the seasoned coach Mickey Arthur and the revamping of the cricket committee are moves that have instilled confidence in the players.

This year is perhaps the most challenging one for the Pakistan cricket team.

Starting with the tough England series next month, the national team will be undertaking back-to-back tours of New Zealand and Australia with a short series against the West Indies sandwiched in between.

In such a scenario, it is important that things start to gel for the team.

The PCB has worked in that direction by removing erratic elements such as opener Ahmed Shehzad and middle-order batsman Umar Akmal and also by arranging a fitness camp at the Kakul Academy for the players.

On Friday, the PCB capped its revival campaign by signing a logo deal with the Edhi Foundation which, coupled with skipper Misbah-ul-Haq's and senior pro Younis Khan's

resolve to lead the team from the front, should more than restore the fans' faith in the game.

Published in Dawn, June 20th, 2016

Food safety awareness

CONSIDERING the lax enforcement of food safety laws in Pakistan, and the general lack of attention towards hygiene, perhaps it is best not to ponder too much about the origins of the food on our plates.

Whether it is street food or meals served in more established eateries, streams of sewage and piles of filth are never too far, located dangerously close to where food is being served.

Even the food we buy for consumption at home is suspect — produce, meat and milk are often stored in a manner that exposes them to dust and insects.

Keeping these grim realities in mind, the decision by Bahawalpur's District Coordination Officer, as reported in this paper on Monday, to enforce food safety regulations at Ramazan bazaars is welcome.

The official ordered compulsory medical screening of butchers at Ramazan bazaars in the district. This has been done to ensure that meat being sold is free from disease. One look inside most abattoirs in Pakistan, or at the filthy conditions that prevail in most neighbourhood butcher shops, will make one realise the wisdom of this move.

Indeed, those working at abattoirs and butcher shops need to be regularly tested to ensure they are in good health and not passing on any infections through their contact with meat. These checks, along with closer scrutiny of the quality of meat being sold, must be replicated in districts countrywide.

Periodically, zealous officers, such as the DCO in question, take up cudgels against those violating food safety regulations.

The example of a proactive provincial food safety official, who took Lahore by storm last year in her crusade to warn or seal offending eateries, also comes to mind.

However, to improve food safety in the long run, rather than individual attempts, the provincial and municipal bodies dealing with public health must lead the campaign to

convince food sellers about the benefits of handling eatables in a hygienic manner. Those who continue to cut corners must be penalised to protect the public's health.

Published in Dawn, June 21th, 2016

Balochistan budget

GIVEN the circumstances it has been drawn up under, it is difficult to gauge the targets and intentions of the Balochistan budget.

The finance secretary is languishing in jail so it is not clear who exactly worked on drawing up the projections and targets in the document.

The announcement was also chaotic, suffering from a delay, and the documents have not been prepared beyond a budget in brief and the Annual Development Programme.

At the time of writing, neither has been uploaded to the website as is standard practice. Beyond the circumstances of its drafting, the budget suffers from large unaccounted allocations, such as 27pc of the ADP being allocated under a head titled 'other'.

Any attempt to discuss the budget and its targets seriously is hampered by these limitations. Balochistan is the one province in the country in the most dire need of governance, given the magnitude of the challenges it is facing.

Although there is no shortage of talented and well-meaning individuals in the province, the trick is to find a way to put them in a position where they can make a difference. Without this, we will have a continuation of the status quo, where funds disappear into disbursement heads with little to no monitoring or oversight.

The funds found in the house of the finance secretary, for which he was arrested, were supposedly from local government allocations. In addition, security-related allocations also disappear into a black hole, never to be heard of again.

The ADP contains massive throw forwards that are the result of poor monitoring of development funds, and schemes run by members of the provincial assembly also eat up large amounts of money with no oversight. Mired in multiple conflicts, Balochistan is controlled by a self-serving tribal elite, where the security forces call most of the shots.

This creates a serious problem of what, in financial circles, is termed ‘moral hazard’ — a situation in which the consequences of one person’s actions are borne by another, thereby warping the incentive structure in a way to prevent any self-correction.

In that sense, the provincial budget and its myriad dysfunctions reflect all that ails Balochistan. For matters in the province to improve, the self-correction of democracy must be allowed to function since there is no force more powerful than this in the sphere of politics.

Only after that can we talk of fixing economic issues.

Published in Dawn, June 21th, 2016

Pakistan’s strategy vis-à-vis NSG

NEARLY eight years since China agreed at the very last minute to a Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver for India — a waiver that was the cornerstone of the Indo-US nuclear deal and opened the door to civilian nuclear trade between India and the 48-member cartel — Indian membership once again appears to hang on Chinese consent.

Pakistan, which argues that Indian membership without a similar entry pass to Pakistan would exacerbate military nuclear competition between the two countries, appears to be one of the two basic reasons why China has withheld its support thus far for India’s membership.

The other is the China-India relationship, or rivalry, and how that connects with the US’s relationship with the two countries: growing alignment and cooperation with India; intensifying rivalry with China.

While the scale of the power and ambitions of the US, China and India dwarf anything that Pakistan can realistically aspire to in the medium term, Pakistan’s threat perception from India — rooted in some very real security and military concerns — means that it is intrinsic to the wrangling over Indian NSG membership. But has Pakistan got its strategy right?

Consider the belated attempt by Pakistan to rally some semblance of international support for a criteria-based entry to the NSG rather than the India-specific one the US has pushed and a section of the NSG has been willing to comply with.

The NSG waiver and the possibility of Indian membership have not been universally popular. Within the US strategic community and among many of the countries that the US has coaxed and arm-twisted into complying with the American line, there remains a great deal of unease with the India-specific approach.

Few of those reservations will likely translate into any country championing Pakistan's inclusion in the NSG, but they did offer an opportunity to reset the rules of the cartel in a way that keeps the door open to eventual Pakistani inclusion — or keep both India and Pakistan out.

Contrast the Indian and American diplomatic push, however, with the seemingly haphazard efforts of Pakistan.

Perhaps the security establishment here is confident that Chinese assent will be withheld. But China's blocking effort could have been bolstered by separate efforts on Pakistan's part to lobby potentially sympathetic countries in the NSG.

Yet, those efforts have only been apparent in recent days, after the extraordinary meeting at GHQ attended by the three joint custodians of the Foreign Office.

It is possible to lament the civil-military divide in the country. It is also possible to condemn the increasing dysfunction in the Foreign Office and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's bizarre insistence on not appointing a full-time foreign minister.

But far more dangerous is what the implications for national security are when the state itself is warning of an arms race with India and is increasingly reliant on the relationship with China in the international arena.

The NSG race does not portend well for Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, June 21th, 2016

Measuring poverty

FOR those who work on poverty alleviation, in whatever capacity, there is good news and bad news. The good news is that we have a new indicator by which to measure poverty.

It is called the Multidimensional Poverty Index, and it uses metrics like education, health and standard of living to measure the level of deprivation suffered by those at the bottom of the pyramid.

This makes it a slightly superior methodology compared to the traditional measurements that use income, consumption and wealth as the main dimensions, thereby enabling a more comprehensive view of poverty in the country.

And this enables the new measure to give us a 'headcount' of the percentage of the population living in poverty, in addition to providing a more nuanced view of the 'intensity' of deprivation, that "reflects the share of deprivation which each poor person experiences on average", according to the report's authors.

The picture that the MPI gives us is not an encouraging one. Almost 39pc of the country's population lives in poverty, if we go by the headcount. And every person in this segment of the population experiences more than a 50pc share of deprivation in all indicators, meaning the intensity of poverty is very high.

Further, the MPI confirms what earlier indicators had also revealed about the great, and growing, regional disparities in poverty incidence across the country — between urban and rural, between provinces and also between districts.

Fortunately, in over a decade, the poverty headcount appears to have fallen, from 55pc in 2004 to 39pc according to the latest reading in 2014.

But the bad news is that beyond a new indicator we have nothing. There are no new ideas on how to go about the task of alleviating poverty.

Measuring poverty is one thing, and when a new indicator fails to paint a substantially new picture of poverty incidence in the country, all we can say is that older ideas have found fresh validation.

Only a few months ago, the Planning Commission announced some revisions to official measurements of poverty. Now we have a new measurement tool altogether, also being adopted by the Planning Commission.

At what point is the commission going to move past the measurement of poverty towards fielding real ideas about actually tackling it?

What is sorely needed is fresh thinking on poverty alleviation that goes beyond the empty rhetoric of 'inclusive growth' touted by the government. What use is measuring the incidence of poverty if we have no ideas about how to tackle the problem? What use is a new indicator if it does not help spur new thinking?

This is the last full year before elections for the Planning Commission to show us that it has something beyond words and numbers to offer to the poorest of the poor in this country. We can only hope they will not waste the opportunity.

Published in Dawn, June 22nd , 2016

Refugees in Pakistan

THE figures are difficult to contemplate, and nearly as disturbing as the stories and images that have emerged of the desperate exodus of humanity streaming out of war-torn nations over the last few years.

According to a UN report on World Refugee Day on Monday, 34,000 people per day were displaced last year — that works out to 24 people per minute of every day.

The number of refugees and internally displaced people worldwide reached a record 65.3m at the end of last year. In 2014, the number was 60m, the highest since the Second World War.

The issue of refugees is one that Pakistan has had a long acquaintance with.

Among the countries hosting refugees at present, Turkey with 2.5m — nearly all of them from Syria — has taken in the most, while Pakistan is at second place with 1.6m. Pakistan, however, along with Iran, has been playing host to its refugee population of Afghans since the 1980s after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan forced millions to flee their country.

As can be seen in the scenarios playing out before us in Europe — and even off its shores — the subject of refugees is a fraught one.

For it hinges on ideas of religion, race, immigration, etc that are politically and emotionally charged, ideas that are used to justify xenophobia and scapegoating

whenever expedient — although conversely, they sometimes bring out the best in people as well.

Closer to home, we have seen Afghan refugees being singled out from time to time whenever a major terrorist incident has taken place or when there is a renewed drive to tackle criminal activity in an area.

On Monday, Foreign Affairs Adviser Sartaj Aziz in a television interview said that Afghan refugee camps in the country had become “safe havens for terrorists” and that those fleeing Afghanistan in the 1980s had brought drugs, guns and instability to Pakistan.

While one can understand a certain amount of weariness with a refugee problem that has been so protracted, our leadership should refrain from sweeping statements that have any affinity with the vitriol being heard from some quarters in the West.

The cherry-picking of facts and lack of nuance in both cases is entirely unjustified and only exacerbates the refugees’ difficulties.

One can fairly assume that rather than languish in camps, many Afghan refugees would themselves prefer to return to their country as soon as it is a viable option.'

Published in Dawn, June 22nd , 2016

Talk of dividing Sindh

THE creation of more provinces or districts within a country should, ideally, not be a divisive issue if such divisions are being carried out for administrative purposes and to bring better governance to the grass roots.

But in Pakistan, the issue of creating more provinces is a lightening rod, igniting populist passions and fuelling ugly divisions. And in Sindh, it has often been witnessed that whenever a political deadlock ensues, talk of the province’s division emerges.

Any talk of redrawing provincial borders is void of unbiased, pragmatic reasoning and is, instead, governed by emotion. And indeed, it was emotionalism and point-scoring that ruled the day when mention of Sindh’s division was made during Monday’s provincial assembly session.

During the session, an MQM lawmaker called for 22 administrative units in the country, including a 'Mohajir province'. This, naturally, elicited a charged response from members of the ruling PPP, who rejected any notion of dividing Sindh.

This is not the first time the MQM has talked of dividing the province; the 'Sindh 1' and 'Sindh 2' scheme proposed by the party sometime ago comes to mind.

Unfortunately, the MQM often resorts to ethnic politics whenever it is on the back foot vis-à-vis the PPP; members of Sindh's ruling party are also known to assume parochial postures when required.

Instead of addressing Sindh's governance problems, both parties tend to sideline the real issues by bickering over controversial proposals.

Instead of dividing Sindh, governance issues can be better addressed by empowering elected governments at the district and local levels, so that they are given sufficient space to function, while the province maintains checks and balances.

However, despite the last phase of LG polls having wrapped up in December, Sindh is still without functional local governments, as the ECP issued a recent notification delaying mayoral elections.

The MQM has criticised both the government and ECP for the delay. Unless mayoral elections are held forthwith and local governments are empowered, more divisive rhetoric can be expected in Sindh.

Published in Dawn, June 22nd , 2016

Brazen kidnapping

EVEN for a city as inured to crime and violence as Karachi, the abduction on Tuesday of Awais Ali Shah, the son of Sindh High Court Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah, was a shocking occurrence.

The young man, a lawyer, was kidnapped in broad daylight by four masked men in Clifton, one of the most upmarket and high-security areas in the metropolis.

His abductors, riding in a car bearing a police number plate, were armed with Kalashnikovs and wearing camouflage uniforms and police caps.

Within a few hours, as soon as the high-profile nature of the case became clear, the city's law-enforcement apparatus sprang into action. Raids are being carried out in various parts of Karachi and, at the time of writing, around two dozen suspects had reportedly been rounded up.

First, to the obvious question: motive. Given the identity of the victim and the circumstances of his abduction, this is clearly no run-of-the-mill kidnapping, but a carefully planned, targeted operation for reasons not quite as clear as the daylight in which the crime was committed. In fact, the police seem to believe that prima facie ransom is not the objective.

Aside from personal enmity — which appears unlikely, given the dramatic modus operandi — the only other plausible explanation is that the abductors by their actions hope to influence the judiciary's conduct and undermine its impartiality in certain cases.

Although the cases of allegedly 'jet-black terrorists' are being sent to military courts, the vast majority of terrorism cases are being handled by the criminal justice system. Moreover, the high courts and the Supreme Court have the jurisdiction to review any sentence passed by a military court.

Thus — and this brings us to the possible perpetrators — militant groups have an obvious stake in being able to put pressure on the law-enforcement system.

However, the audacious manner in which the kidnapping was carried out — unnecessarily risky, given it could have been achieved in a far more low-key style on some quiet street — suggests a curious arrogance.

One could even say it smacks of a challenge thrown to law-enforcement agencies. Who could have undertaken such a brazen operation?

The kidnapping also highlights the necessity of having mandatory security protocols in place not only for the individuals representing institutions of a sensitive nature, but their close family members as well. It would help avoid compromising situations such as the one that may have arisen with this abduction.

Lastly, a word about the electronic media that, instead of exercising restraint and good judgment, is reporting on the police raids in search of the victim in a manner that could put his life at risk.

Instead of speculation, television channels should base their coverage on information conveyed by law-enforcement agencies, who in turn, it must be said, should keep an anxious public in the loop as far as possible.

Published in Dawn, June 23rd, 2016

Strained foreign ties

GEOGRAPHY has its own security imperatives. It also has its own advantages. A long, narrow country, Pakistan has two potential sources of regional strength: shared borders with four countries and access to a sea that connects onwards to the world's trading routes.

Yet, the architects of this country's security policy have somehow contrived to once again turn potential advantages into growing hazards.

The National Assembly echoed on Tuesday to questions from opposition parliamentarians that together amounted to asking the government why the country is not on good terms with most of its immediate neighbours and suffering increasing friction in its relationship with the US superpower.

The questions were somewhat opportunistic and self-serving: the PPP had virtually no influence on regional ties in its last term in office and the PTI is more than willing to play the role of hawk when it comes to relationships with Afghanistan and the US.

Yet, the opposition parliamentarians' opportunism aside, the questions they asked had a great deal of validity. With Afghanistan, Iran, India and the US, an alarming degree of emotionalism and unwelcome policy slants appear to be intensifying problems rather than solving them.

Clearly, Pakistan has its legitimate grievances where those countries are concerned.

The Afghan government appears to want to transfer blame for its own failures on the political and security front to Pakistan while doing little to address the issue of anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

The possibility of Iran allowing its territory bordering Balochistan to be used to stoke trouble inside Pakistan is unwelcome and unnecessary.

India seems unsure whether it wants to solve the terrorism problem that plagues the bilateral relationship or use the spectre of terrorist violence to not engage Pakistan.

The US non-strategy in Afghanistan has exacerbated security problems in that country that the superpower appears to want to blame Pakistan for. But each of those countries also have their own concerns and grievances regarding each other.

Yet, India is finding ways to partner Iran, the US continues to work with the Afghan government, and India and the US are attempting to take their bilateral relationship to historic highs, even as the US frets about market access to India and the latter drives a hard bargain on a range of issues.

Somehow, and for reasons unclear, Pakistan is allowing specific security concerns to override positive aspects of relations with each of those countries. Geography is making us prisoner of our fears rather than setting us free to engage and grow.

Published in Dawn, June 23rd, 2016

Snow leopards

THE slow disappearance of one of the most majestic animals in Pakistan is cause for deep concern, and efforts to protect the remaining stock should be redoubled.

The snow leopard is an elusive cat known for its stealth and immaculate beauty. It is a menace to the livestock of people in the northern areas, but poses no threat to humans.

This marvellous specimen of feline grace was the subject of an episode of Planet Earth, the BBC documentary about the natural wonders of the world, with stunning footage that was obtained by using dozens of hidden cameras of the leopard in its natural habitat.

A few years ago, it was estimated that up to 600 snow leopards lived in Pakistan, scattered across the mountainous north. The latest estimate says there are now 200, a precipitous decline.

All countries have obligations to protect the diversity of heritage they are entrusted with. This means not only protecting heritage sites and landscapes, but also biodiversity and endangered species that live in that country.

There are only an estimated 6,000 snow leopards left in the world, and if a sizable figure is found in Pakistan, then the country has a direct obligation to safeguard their dwindling numbers.

The mountains where they live are gradually being opened up more and more to human movement, especially with large-scale construction taking place in the northern areas.

Nobody is saying that activity should cease, but in opening up the wonders of the mountains, greater care needs to be taken to ensure that the landscape is not soiled and animal species that make their home in the area are not disturbed.

The snow leopard is a gift from nature, and like so many of our national treasures, needs to be looked after properly. It would be a tragedy for our future generations if we were to be callous to nature's generosity and sit idly by as this magnificent animal disappeared from our country.

Published in Dawn, June 23rd, 2016

Sabri's murder

THE stirring baritone of Amjad Sabri, one of this country's most renowned qawwals and an iconic cultural symbol, has been stilled forever. With him died a glorious intergenerational heritage of devotional music that embodied the benign inclusivity of Sufism.

And the manner of his death on Wednesday afternoon struck another grievous blow at the already fragile sense of security in Karachi.

Attacked in his car by two gunmen on a motorbike as he drove with a friend in one of the most crowded areas of the metropolis, Amjad Sabri was killed instantly in the hail of bullets aimed at him.

Although a splinter group of the banned TTP has claimed responsibility, police are still trying to establish the perpetrators' identity and their motive.

Over the past year in particular, law-enforcement agencies have claimed comprehensive success in tackling serious crime in Pakistan's largest city since the operation to restore law and order in Karachi began in late 2013.

There is, no doubt, a considerable degree of truth to this: statistics show that terrorism is down by 80pc and targeted killings by around 50pc in the metropolis. However, any sense of complacency on this score has been shattered by the events of the last few days.

On Tuesday, just 48 hours before Amjad Sabri's murder, the Sindh High Court chief justice's son Awais Ali Shah was kidnapped in broad daylight in an upscale, high-security Karachi locality.

Last week, an Ahmadi doctor was shot dead in his clinic, the second member of the community to have been killed within a month. It is pertinent, however, to point out that even when the threat of terrorism, targeted killings and extortion seemed to have somewhat receded in Karachi, the runaway levels of street crime in the city mean that a perpetual sense of insecurity prevails among its residents.

According to official data, street crime, especially mobile theft and motorcycle snatching, increased sharply in the first 10 days of Ramazan and claimed four lives.

Even though the TTP's claim — whose veracity is difficult to establish — did include the allegation of 'blasphemy', it is worth asking where the law and order operation in Karachi is going wrong.

Successfully tackling militancy involves across-the-board, even-handed action against criminals of all shades.

Have the law-enforcement authorities taken their eye off the ball by focusing too selectively on a certain category of criminals? Such an approach could well have emboldened other outlaw elements in the city — specifically religious extremist groups, or sleeper cells of such groups — who are once again exploiting the space they have found to carry out their agenda.

Nevertheless, the spirit of this complex, tumultuous city endures – and it showed its resilience in the thousands who turned out to say farewell to the maestro of qawwali, yet another bright light snuffed out in the killing fields of Karachi.

Published in Dawn, June 24th, 2016

Tragedy to spectacle

EVERY terrorist strike or high-profile targeted killing is followed by what has become almost a ritual. Media teams rush to the site, channels air whatever footage they can lay their hands on, while police and other law-enforcement personnel pose for photographs on the site pretending to examine it closely for clues as the cameras roll.

Meanwhile, on social media, a stream of lyrical tributes and righteous rage pours forth, commingling with ad hoc images and videos – shot by passersby on their mobile phones – showing the grisly side of the affair with almost voyeuristic glee.

Then the moment passes and it all returns to business as usual. When, and more importantly how, will this cycle break?

Taming social media is a different matter. But mainstream media and law enforcement can do much to improve their initial reactions to every such event.

In spite of a long history of terror attacks and targeted killings, it seems police does not really have an SOP to shape their first response.

The crime scene is examined in almost theatrical detail while the cameras roll, but forensics – besides ballistics – play virtually no role in the subsequent investigation.

The media has learned how to deal with bomb blasts and rape cases, and at least we no longer see disturbing videos of burning buildings and dead bodies in the immediate aftermath of an attack. But in the case of targeted killings, the rush to capture the first visuals and thrust the microphone into the faces of survivors is still there, along with the manic pursuit of every bit of detail which can help give the channel a perceived edge over its rivals.

Greater sensitivity needs to be shown by channel staff which can only come about once the media managements agree amongst themselves to keep their coverage of such events sane and measured. Following up on the story is more important than breathlessly chasing breaking elements in the immediate aftermath.

Police also need to show greater professionalism in cordoning off the site, questioning witnesses and the collection of evidence.

The haphazard outpourings of grief and condemnations are little more than a ritualised dissipation of the anguish that each such incident brings.

The political blame game that ensues is the closest we ever come to any search for corrective measures. This pattern must break, and the channels and police should lead the way out.

Published in Dawn, June 24th, 2016

Funds for madressah

DOLING out public funds to forward political agendas is a well-established practice in Pakistan. Out of many such instances, one particular political donation has been in the news of late.

According to reports, the PTI-led KP government has put aside Rs300m for Darul Uloom Haqqania, located in Akora Khattak, from the recently passed provincial budget.

Party and government officials have defended the ‘donation’ in the name of bringing the seminary — overseen by Maulana Samiul Haq, who runs his own faction of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam — into the mainstream.

Apparently, the funds will be spent on construction and repairs at the seminary. However, this ‘donation’ has raised hackles, as questions of propriety and conflict of interest arise.

For one thing, the madressah is a private institution. Critics are right to ask why a private set-up is receiving a large amount of public funds.

After all, the KP budget is financed by the taxpayer; it is not the funds of the PTI that are being provided to the Darul Uloom, but of the people of the province. Also, if the KP administration justifies providing government funds to a private madressah, what of the other private institutions in the province; will they also be entitled to financial support from the state?

Even if the seminary did not have links to hard-line circles — as it very much does — it would be difficult to justify this transfer of funds. Moreover, the Darul Uloom is a highly political seminary, a veritable arm of the JUI-S. Samiul Haq is also a rival of the JUI faction led by Maulana Fazlur Rahman, who in turn has a toxic rivalry with the PTI.

So the financial support can be seen as supporting the ‘enemy’ of the KP government’s ‘enemy’, while the madressah is located in district Nowshera, the home district of the KP chief minister, which raises issues of conflict of interest.

The decision to grant the seminary state funds should be revisited as it sets a negative precedent and politicises public funds.

Published in Dawn, June 24th, 2016

The great unravelling

Once again, a spectre is haunting Europe. It is the spectre of a great unravelling, not only of European unity but also of European values.

No matter how hard they tried to put a graceful sheen on the aftermath ofThursday's historic referendum by saying that Britain will remain a country that is "open and inclusive", the leaders of the 'leave' campaign cannot escape the fact that their triumph owed itself to the stirrings of atavistic hatreds and xenophobic fears.

They should reflect on the fact that the only leaders on the global stage cheering the result of their campaign are Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen. The outcome of the referendum accelerates Britain's slide towards an inward-looking country. It has also unleashed forces that could one day sweep away Boris Johnson and Michael Gove — the leaders of the 'leave' campaign.

Examine: Europe's regression

The wave of ultranationalist politics sweeping across the world, from Donald Trump in America to Narendra Modi in India, with the European right wing making strong gains along the way, is gathering momentum, gaining a boost from the campaign behind the 'leave' vote in Britain.

The fact that the phenomenon is sweeping across many countries, however, shows that its roots are deeper than the circumstances obtaining in any one state alone.

The growing gulf between the rulers and the ruled, between the haves and the have-nots, and across cultures that rub each other on the streets of almost every city in the advanced industrial West, provides the fuel for the engine of xenophobic politics, driven on a combustible cocktail of fear and hate.

The results of the 'leave' victory will be widely felt beyond Britain. The gyrations travelling through the financial markets will likely stabilise soon.

But the deeper implications, for European unity, for inclusive politics, and regional integration in areas beyond Europe, are grave.

Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel was right to remind us in her reaction to the vote that ultimately "European unity is about European peace". It is a dangerous trend that is sweeping across the world, and if a way out is not found, it risks dragging us back to an era where values mattered less than force. Taking the decision to leave the European Union may well be the right of the British.

But the rise of a more vernacular politics, steeped in the exclusionary language of identity and the muscular assertion of ego, bodes ill for all of us.

Europe has been the beacon of cooperative values and inclusive politics for more than half a century now, forged in the heat of the great wars the continent has known.

Yet today — in the opening decades of the 21st century — it is sadly reverting to exactly that style of politics that paved its descent into the great conflicts of the early 20th century.

Published in Dawn, June 25th, 2016

DG ISPR's grievance

GEN Asim Bajwa may not have been the right person to say it, but there is some merit to what he said in an interview to a German media organisation.

Commenting on foreign policy matters, historical or otherwise, and Pakistan's relations with its neighbours ought to be the political government's remit.

Yet, such are the times once again that the military has become the de facto spokesperson for the country's security and anti-militancy policies.

Unwelcome as that may be for the democratic project, the substance of what the DG ISPR claimed does need to be examined, especially since it gives an indication about the thinking of the country's architects of national security.

When asked about the Western narrative that Pakistan has not done enough in the so-called war on terror, Gen Bajwa was emphatic: that view is an injustice to Pakistan and it is the outside world that has not done enough to help Pakistan.

Clearly, Pakistan has not got the support it needed in the fight against the banned TTP, especially since the launch of Operation Zarb-i-Azb. After years of international hand-wringing over internal stability in Pakistan, the state simply has not got the kind of cooperation it needs to allow its priorities to deliver the results needed.

Moreover, much of what Pakistan has done, be it in the 1980s in Afghanistan or the sustained efforts to find and capture Al Qaeda leaders in the years since 9/11, has been almost immediately eclipsed by the notorious demand that Pakistan do more.

Legitimate as some of Pakistan's complaints may be, there are two other aspects to consider here. For one, complaining about injustice, betrayal or abandonment by the international community is not a substitute for policy.

The key must surely be to seek productive engagement and secure greater cooperation. There are many aspects of Pakistan's ongoing counter-insurgency and counterterrorism operations that can be boosted by the military, diplomatic and financial contributions of Pakistan's regional and global partners.

The TTP and its affiliated groups cannot realistically be defeated by an isolated Pakistan going it alone.

Second, there is a need to consider the basis of the outside world's concerns regarding Pakistan.

It is not so much a question of sequencing or progressive rollback of all forms of militancy and extremism on Pakistani soil, but the need to signal that the state does in fact consider all militants, be they anti-Afghanistan, anti-India or anti-whomever, to be a problem that needs to eventually be addressed.

Published in Dawn, June 25th, 2016

Radio Pakistan, Karachi

PRESERVING historical buildings and heritage sites has never been the strong point of successive governments.

Often, it is state institutions themselves that take over historical edifices and use them for purposes other than what they were originally designed for. Take the example of the old Broadcasting House, as Radio Pakistan's building on Karachi's bustling M.A. Jinnah Rd, is known.

A stately structure standing in the heart of the city, surrounded by grime and noise, this grand old building has witnessed history, quite literally, as the Karachi home of Radio Pakistan. In an age before 24/7 news channels and instant social media updates, this was the nerve centre of news, information and entertainment in the city.

Many a famed broadcaster, artist and intellectual was nurtured within its walls, and flourished in his or her respective field. But today, a very different tenant occupies Broadcasting House: the Pakistan Rangers, Sindh.

Radio Pakistan's main operations had shifted to the new Broadcasting House located adjacent to the city's Civic Centre in 2007.

Today, only a few departments still operate out of the old building. However, during Muharram last year, the Rangers moved in as they needed space to manage security. As highlighted in a write-up in this paper, this was supposed to be a temporary arrangement.

Yet, the Rangers seem to have taken a liking to their new environs, reportedly occupying rooms and moving in furniture. The force has also taken over other heritage buildings in Karachi, including the Jinnah Courts and Mitha Ram Hostel.

There is plenty of real estate in the metropolis that the Rangers can occupy to establish offices or barracks; heritage buildings should be vacated and put to better use.

For example, in the old Broadcasting House's case, it can be turned into a museum dedicated to the nation's broadcasting history. It is unfortunate that an edifice that once buzzed with news broadcasts and the hum of melodies today echoes with the thud of jackboots.

Radio Pakistan's old building should be restored to its former glory.

Published in Dawn, June 25th, 2016

Regional proxies

GEN Raheel Sharif has warned that the "contours of future wars" in the region are changing, presumably referring to the potential for both state-sponsored and non-state terrorism to demoralise nations and destabilise states. The proxy game, however, is an old and dangerous one in this region. Pakistan may not have invented the genre, but it has certainly been an enthusiastic proponent. First, explicitly against the Soviets in Afghanistan and later, the support for militancy in India-held Kashmir being an open secret. But other countries have certainly played their part. In the regional context, there is no proxy fight with greater potential for disaster than the sectarian one between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Pakistan with its multi-ethnic, multi-sect population effectively became a giant battleground between Saudi-inspired intolerance and Iran-inspired pushback. Even today, the scale of interference in the social fabric of Pakistan by Saudi Arabia and Iran can only be guessed at — there having been no attempt to either map or control external influences.

India, too, has played a significant role in Afghanistan and, as alleged by the security establishment, inside Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan but also in Fata and other parts. So Gen Sharif is timely and correct in stating that "Pakistan is opposed to using proxies against other countries and will also not allow any other country to use proxies against Pakistan". Where Gen Sharif and the political government that has marginalised itself in matters of national security and foreign policy appear to be failing, however, is in providing broader solutions. While it may be necessary for the military to locate proxies on Pakistani soil and act against them lawfully, such actions do little to address the underlying conflicts fuelling proxy fights. Perhaps what the military and political leaderships should also be looking at is to bring together the relevant regional powers to discuss such matters frankly and in the spirit of putting an end to them.

Diplomacy has not lately been a strong suit of Pakistan, but a formula for the possible ratcheting down of regional proxy fights, at least those involving Afghanistan, India and Pakistan, may lie in Gen Sharif's formulation: simultaneously pledge to not use proxies while demanding that others cease using their own proxies too. A verification mechanism can be developed to ensure all sides abide by the promises they make, but that is for later. The first step is to create goodwill. The security establishment is deeply concerned about the direction that regional power dynamics are headed in — just as Pakistan's neighbours are concerned by the choices they perceive this country is making. Gen Sharif has established himself as an important figure who can both promise and deliver and who has a few legacy-creating months left in office. To prevent future wars, Gen Sharif could move to try and end present conflicts.

Published in Dawn, June 26th, 2016

Torture by the state

CALL it ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’, as the Americans have notoriously done, or gloss over it entirely, the fact remains that torture has long been an integral part of the law-enforcement machinery in this country. On Friday, a consultation organised by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and the World Organisation Against Torture was held in Islamabad to review the state’s compliance with the UN Convention Against Torture which Pakistan signed in 2010. Among the points that emerged at the consultation was that despite Pakistan’s ratification of this convention, brutality at the hands of law-enforcement agencies is only considered torture when it involves extremely serious physical injuries. It was also mentioned that a private bill against torture passed by the Senate in March 2015 is pending in the National Assembly.

The use of torture is usually driven by the urge to extract information, intimidate individuals, or exact revenge for perceived transgressions, often a mix of all three. It is the first resort of an unsophisticated state with weak oversight mechanisms and a civil society unable to effectively protect citizens’ rights. In Pakistan’s increasingly militarised security environment, where individuals can be glibly labelled ‘jet-black terrorists’ even prior to their trial, where the end justifies the means, the use of torture as an instrument of law enforcement has become even more entrenched. In 2012, the horrific Adiala 11 case came to light when seven men detained by intelligence agencies appeared in court holding urine bags, their bodies brutalised and frail. More recently, there was the death of Aftab Ahmed, senior member of the MQM who died in Karachi in the Rangers’ custody, his body bearing clear evidence of unmitigated savagery. While many former detainees — relieved to at least be alive — prefer to keep their agony private, dumped bodies of ‘missing’ people routinely display signs of sadistic violence. As if the obvious moral imperative were not enough, there are also practical reasons for international law against torture to be respected. A number of reports, including that of the US Senate about the CIA’s ‘enhanced interrogation’ of terrorism suspects post 9/11, have demonstrated that information gleaned through torture is highly unreliable. Much like practices such as slavery or genocide, torture falls in the lowest categories of human behaviour. It is time Pakistan honoured its commitments to put an end to this shameful open secret enacted in shadowy ‘safe houses’, police stations and internment centres across the country.

Published in Dawn, June 26th, 2016

PTI chief's threat

IMRAN Khan has once again threatened to take to the streets. The reason this time, he says, is the government's frustrating stance on the probe into the Panama Papers. The PTI chief's warning, coming some 10 days before Eid, throws up the possibility of the country returning to the 2014 protest days after the festival — a protest that, though a democratic right, will be at great cost to the economy, while causing much inconvenience to the people. Soon there will be advice for the PTI leader to show restraint in the name of the national interest; there will be reminders about how his previous campaign had ended with him wasting crucial political capital. There will be calls — with considerable merit to them — insisting that Mr Khan use parliament to air his views, or take his case to court. These are all sane suggestions. But the problem is that the PTI leader is not convinced the matter should be left to either of these institutions. Maybe a general election that ends with the decimation of one side … short of that, there is little chance of the PTI giving up its protest.

There is a larger problem. In the democratic debate in Pakistan, there exist many fundamental questions crying out for quick answers. Not least of them is the one pertaining to politicians' ability to instal a system that can help them find solutions to political disputes arising from time to time. What choices does an opposition have for running a campaign for dislodging a government that it finds incompetent or corrupt? In the past, the opposition would either appeal to the president to fire the prime minister and his government or ask the military chief to take over. The presidential sacking is now constitutionally not possible, whereas the knowledgeable insist that exercising the military option is not as easy as it once was. Pakistanis will have to be patient with politicians and their reactions. The new code will take lots of time to craft.

Published in Dawn, June 26th, 2016

CASA's promise

THE latest decision by Nepra to approve the power purchase agreement for the import of electricity from Kyrgyzstan is another step towards the realisation of a path-breaking project for Pakistan. The Planning Commission had aired some reservations a year ago when the project was going through the process of government approval, but the fact that it remains on track is good news for the country. Those reservations included a higher transit fee for Afghanistan than had been originally anticipated, and a tariff that is more than what Afghanistan pays for importing electricity through similar arrangements with its neighbours. It is entirely proper for the Planning Commission to have shared its thoughts on the matter at that time, but it is important to bear in mind that it nonetheless granted its approval for the project, which enjoys the backing of the government. The tariffs that Afghanistan pays for its power import from neighbours cannot be compared to what Pakistan is being asked to pay under CASA 1000 because those are not commercial arrangements. Afghanistan is basically being provided power at concessional rates as assistance, and the donor community plays its role in helping make the payments. Pakistan should not seek power on concessional terms since its situation is not comparable to the one prevailing in Afghanistan.

The overall project to build a transmission line carrying 1,300MW of electricity from energy-surplus countries in Central Asia to Pakistan carries tremendous promise for the latter. With the passage of time, the same arrangements can be broadened to include other countries, build more branches from the first transmission line, and perhaps move towards a regional market in electricity at some point in the future. Plans also exist to lay an additional 500km of transmission line from Kyrgyzstan, where the power will originate, to Kazakhstan which has substantial LNG-based power surpluses as well. This will ensure that the transmission line envisioned under CASA 1000 can become a year-round source of supply, instead of only six months out of the year as it currently is since it is based on hydro surpluses. Once that happens, the tariff can actually come down further. Security remains the single largest question mark hanging over the project, but if the sponsors and the countries concerned are willing to work on lessening these risks, the grounds for objection by other parties will disappear. The project should be advanced on a fast-track basis.

Published in Dawn, June 27th, 2016

Firefighting measures

IT is a miracle that only one life was lost in the multiple fire incidents in Karachi on Friday and Sunday. Fires broke out at four separate spots in the city — in the SITE area, Gulbai, Hawkesbay and Clifton — and in the case of the Gulbai blaze it took firefighters hours to contain the inferno. Clearly, the blazes posed a considerable challenge to the KMC's ill-prepared fire brigade, as the civic body had to call in reinforcements from other departments. Fires in Karachi are not uncommon and the city has witnessed some deadly infernos in the past, most tragically the Baldia factory disaster of 2012. These incidents point to the fact that this megacity is largely unprepared to deal with emergency situations, particularly large fires. For example, there were reports that firefighters were short of water while battling the blazes on Friday. Also, it is unfortunate that in this city of millions there is no proper fire hydrant system. Moreover, Karachi has just over 30 fire tenders, whereas experts say it should have 10 times that number. It has also been pointed out that in some new constructions fire safety measures have been overlooked.

By ignoring fire safety measures, we are only paving the way for disaster. As part of a larger emergency response mechanism, Karachi needs a well-equipped, well-trained fire brigade. For example, timing is essential in controlling blazes, which is why it is key that there must be an adequate number of fire stations in the city so that fire tenders are able to arrive at the scene within minutes of a blaze being reported. Firefighters must also be trained in dealing with different types of blazes, eg where to use water, where to use foam etc. There should also be fire drills in public buildings at regular intervals, while new projects — particularly high-rises and apartment blocks — must have clearly defined fire exits and modern firefighting systems. These measures can only be enacted by an empowered city administration that is familiar with the contours and layout of Karachi, and has the funds to upgrade emergency services.

Published in Dawn, June 27th, 2016

Balochistan's corruption problem

WHEN Balochistan Finance Secretary Mushtaq Raisani was arrested early last month and hundreds of millions of rupees in cash were confiscated from his residence in Quetta, it was immediately clear that a vast case of corruption had been unearthed. Yet, in the days and weeks since, the scale of that corruption has only steadily grown, stretching to properties and luxury vehicles in Karachi and engulfing a range of public officials and accomplices. Thus far the political leadership of Balochistan has not been directly implicated in Mr Raisani's corruption. But that too only appears to be a matter of time – it being inconceivable that a bureaucrat could preside over a vast provincial and inter-provincial corruption network without the knowledge and complicity of his political superiors. Taken together with the corruption unearthed by military investigators at the very top of the Frontier Corps leadership in the province, it appears that Balochistan has a corruption problem that is staggeringly wide and unfathomably deep. While that may not be entirely surprising, recent events have made it impossible to ignore the matter any longer.

It remains the case that Balochistan's primary problem is the low-level insurgency that has wracked the Baloch-dominated areas of the province for over a decade now. Without security – with large swathes of the province effectively cut off from the rest of the country – Balochistan's governance, social and economic problems cannot be meaningfully addressed. But are corruption and misgovernance getting in the way of solving Balochistan's security problems? It does not require conspiracy theories to understand the connection between public and military officials intent on enriching themselves and the failure to politically and through law-and-order measures resolve a fundamental security problem. It is not even a question of symptom or cause; the vast corruption in Balochistan could be both a factor contributing to and exacerbated by the insurgency and the wretched state of governance in the province.

While the problems may be identifiable, the solutions are far from clear. Corruption is both a national issue and a provincial one, while Balochistan's security problems cannot be resolved without bringing the centre, the province and the political and military leaderships together. Yet, doing nothing ought not to be an option. Perhaps a starting point could be to ensure that the investigation of the Raisani corruption nexus is conducted impartially and thoroughly – allowing the investigators to go wherever the evidence takes them rather than let political or security considerations overrule them. Whether that requires the support of the superior judiciary or whoever else can help ensure impartiality and thoroughness, the investigators themselves could make clear. Mr Raisani surely is the keeper of many explosive secrets.

Published in Dawn, June 27th, 2016

Priorities and public health

IN recent years, polio has taken centre stage on the health landscape in Pakistan. To some extent, given the international dimensions of the issue, that is justifiable.

And while it is encouraging that the outlook on polio appears to have improved considerably, a number of recent reports illustrate that general access to health remains deeply problematic, beset by institutional apathy and corruption.

An inquiry committee investigating the health infrastructure in some Khyber Agency tehsils has discovered that 19 out of 20 community health centres and dispensaries in those areas have been non-functional since 2003-04.

To add insult to injury, the Fata Secretariat has been regularly shelling out funds for rent as well as for the salaries of 120 absentee employees.

The situation in some other tribal agencies is believed to be the same. Meanwhile, appallingly, there are only two chest surgeons in Karachi's public sector which caters to patients from both Sindh itself and Balochistan.

Long delays in surgery are thus inevitable, and 200 patients are currently on the waiting list.

In an important sense, a nation's standing in the world is gauged by how its people's basic needs are being met. Much like education, health has received no more than lip service in Pakistan, which spends merely 0.9pc of its GDP on healthcare.

Misplaced priorities mean that emphasis tends to be on big ticket, high-visibility items rolled out with much fanfare and which are useful for propaganda purposes.

Consider this: federal funding for the Khyber Institute of Child Health and a burns hospital, both in Peshawar, has not been forthcoming; instead it has been diverted, it is reported, to Islamabad's metro bus project.

Health is not a constitutional right per se in Pakistan, although it stands to reason that like education it too should be included through an amendment. Nevertheless, the principles of policy set out in the Constitution enjoin the state to promote the "social and economic well-being of the people", which cannot be achieved without providing access to quality public healthcare.

Unlike the situation not only in many developing countries but also the West, the majority of Pakistanis seek recourse to private healthcare because public health facilities are either absent or substandard.

These out-of-pocket expenses force them to cut corners in other spheres of life, such as nutrition or education, which then further compromises their social and economic well-being. But this vicious cycle cannot be de-linked from the overall state of the nation.

Despite the outbreaks of communicable diseases in the country — measles in Sindh being among the more recent — non-communicable diseases are an increasing concern.

It is estimated that approximately 50pc of Pakistan's population suffer from one or more chronic NCDs, and that the economic burden associated with deaths from these conditions will reach $296m by 2025. Health and education for all is the very bedrock of development.

Published in Dawn, June 28th, 2016

Karachi security

IT has become a grim tradition: each time something extraordinary happens — extraordinary even by the violent standards of Karachi — the military and political leaderships of the country arrive in the provincial capital of Sindh.

The procession of leaders is usually led by army chief Gen Raheel Sharif and often features Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan.

Occasionally, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also makes his way to the country's largest city. By now, the ceremonies have also become familiar. Briefings are held for sombre-looking attendees.

Vows are made to crack down yet more fiercely against unnamed and unknown criminal and militant elements. The ISPR puts out a press release.

The interior minister holds a news conference. Rapid arrests are made and some of the arrested are presented to the media, but with their faces covered.

Cases are registered and either familiar groups or unfamiliar offshoots are blamed for the violence that the city has witnessed. Then, after a while, when the familiar and unfamiliar criminal and militant groups strike again, the tradition is repeated once more.

Without a doubt, Karachi is in many ways a more secure, less unpredictable city than it was some years ago.

Political violence is down as is the generalised fear that had seeped into the city's denizens. Moreover, a city on the scale and size of Karachi is always likely to produce some incidents that shock the conscience and challenge its administrators.

The state simply does not exist in a sophisticated and organised enough manner in Karachi to regulate law and order to standards that are world class. But the assassination of Amjad Sabri and the kidnapping of the son of Sindh High Court Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah are a direct and flagrant challenge to the authority of the state — and those insisting that Karachi is on an irreversible upward security trajectory.

It is not because Sabri was a famed qawwal and Awais Ali Shah the scion of an important official that the two crimes matter more.

In assassinating Sabri, the killers were deliberately trying to instil fear in a wider community, both in Karachi and in those who adhere to the values that Sabri exemplified.

In kidnapping Mr Shah, the perpetrators are attempting to intimidate the superior judiciary perhaps to make them more reluctant to take on organised crime and militant groups.

Both state and society, then, have also been attacked in the recent twin blows to Karachi. A determined, lawful response is called for.

Published in Dawn, June 28th, 2016

Fallujah's liberation

AT least in the Iraqi theatre of war, the tide seems to have turned against the militant Islamic State group, with government forces finally capturing Fallujah on Sunday after bitter fighting.

A triumphant Haider al-Abadi, the prime minister, asked the Iraqi people in a TV address to celebrate Fallujah's liberation and referred to the part the army, police, the "popular mobilisation forces" and "tribal levies" had played in securing the city after heavy sacrifices.

There is no doubt Fallujah's loss is a major blow to IS and shows the confidence the Iraqi forces have gained after taking a number of IS-held cities, including Tikrit, Sanjar, Baiji and Ramadi, the capital of the sprawling Anbar province in which Fallujah is located.

Mosul, Iraq's second biggest city, still remains under IS control, and Mr Abadi has declared it is going to be the next job. But the final victory in Fallujah has come at a terrible price in terms of civilian casualties and mass exodus.

According to the UN, at least 80,000 people have fled Fallujah and found themselves without food and shelter in Iraq's sweltering desert in the fasting month.

With Fallujah taken, the government must now find the time and assets to focus on the displaced lot, because relief workers have warned of a humanitarian disaster if remedial measures are not taken immediately.

Fallujah's liberation has also led to some acts of arson and violence which seem to militate against the unity shown by the Iraqi people in wresting the city from IS.

As pointed out by the chief of Anbar province's governing council, the "popular mobilisation forces", backed largely by Iran, were engaged in "reprisals", even though Sunni militias too have been part of the anti-IS operations.

There is no doubt an IS-free Iraq will have a major impact on the military situation in Syria. But Mr Abadi must ensure that the war against IS remains Iraq's national enterprise and is not allowed to degenerate into a sectarian conflict.

Published in Dawn, June 28th, 2016

Brexit wake-up call for Pakistan

ADVISER to the Prime Minister Sartaj Aziz and his inter-ministerial panel are right to point out that no immediate impact is likely on Pakistan from the recent UK referendum fallout. But it would be a mistake to take comfort from this assessment.

Britain's exit from the European Union has not even started yet. The real game will begin after activation of Article 50 of the EU treaty which triggers the withdrawal process.

Given the enormity of the event that is getting under way, it would be short-sighted to continue in the belief that the crisis will never land here.

Perhaps Mr Aziz should recall the year 1998, when Pakistan was hit by sanctions and our foreign currency accounts were frozen.

The official narrative at the time was that the decision was inevitable and triggered by nuclear sanctions. But there was more to the story. The great Asian financial crisis had just swept the world, and Pakistan was standing on increasingly weak legs with the heavily leveraged position of its foreign currency deposits.

The economic emergency that appeared to break upon us so suddenly was not born out of a single event; it had been years in the making.

Due to thinking that refuses to focus on anything beyond the immediate, the country landed in the middle of a massive crisis with the government completely unprepared and reacting in panic. It took years to dig ourselves out of the consequences of that decision.

The story repeated itself in 2008. Warnings about several weaknesses in the economy — the current account deficit, inflation and runaway domestic debt — had been sounded for well over a year. But the government of Pervez Musharraf was in denial, saying that the crisis developing in the Western world would have no impact on Pakistan, and the weaknesses being pointed out by the people were imaginary.

Once again, when the crisis landed with its full ferocity, the stock market had to be frozen and an emergency appeal made to the IMF as reserves plummeted and the banking system began seizing up.

One more time, it took years to emerge from the consequences of the decision to freeze the stock market and to rebuild reserves.

Instead of repeating that there will be 'no immediate impact' on Pakistan, the government should learn from the past and at the very least start brainstorming with relevant bodies,

such as the State Bank and stakeholders in the external sector, on the sources of0 vulnerability that exist in our economy, and how best we can anticipate the shape of the challenges the crisis will present as it plays out in the months ahead.

Let's not repeat the mistakes of the past.

At least this time we should take a more proactive approach in dealing with the inevitable fallout. Many other countries are doing exactly that.

Published in Dawn, June 29th, 2016

Reference against PM

IT is a dangerous game that the PPP is playing. In a bid to keep the pressure on the PML-N and perhaps raise its own political profile — such are the times that the party has inflicted on itself — the PPP has drawn up a shambolic reference against the following: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif; Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif; Finance Minister Ishaq Dar; Mohammad Safdar, MNA and husband of Maryam Nawaz; and Hamza Shahbaz, MNA and son of the Punjab chief minister.

The substance of the allegations is politically unproblematic. The PPP has claimed that, in the wake of the revelations in the Panama Papers and the explanations offered by the PML-N and the prime minister himself, Nawaz Sharif and his family members in parliament have mis-declared their assets to the Election Commission in their mandatory filings.

But it is the recourse to religiously inspired clauses in the disqualification criteria set out in Article 62 and 63 of the Constitution — introduced through an amendment by the dictator Ziaul Haq three decades ago and which no parliament since has been able to revise — that is worrying and problematic.

Politically and legislatively, the reference to "honest and ameen" in Article 62(f) is a slippery slope that over the decades has inflicted a great deal of harm on democratic politics.

The phrase is often invoked as a catch-all measure to trap political opponents and attack them in at least the court of public opinion.

The PPP is surely aware of the history and sensitivity of the charge that has now been laid against the PML-N leadership.

To invoke the spirit of a dictator who so persecuted the PPP in this manner and at this stage is doubly shameful: with the ECP effectively non-functional and the government and the opposition still needing to work together to elect the four members of the commission, the reference filed against the Sharif family members is purely for public consumption.

It appears that the PPP leadership has all but given up on reorganising and reinvigorating its grass-roots politics in Punjab and is falling back on lazy opportunism to try and hold back the PML-N.

To the extent that political parties need to engage in robust competition and that the PML-N has genuine and serious questions to answer about the wealth of the ruling family, the PPP is both entitled to and right in asking relevant questions. Surely, though, that should not involve the path the party has opted to take.

Published in Dawn, June 29th, 2016

Police recruitment

THE proposal for the army to play a prominent role in the recruitment of 20,000 police personnel for Karachi is problematic in several respects.

While the decision to recruit more personnel and have the army train them was taken in the apex committee's meeting in May, the plan to involve the military in their recruitment as well as the proposal to induct 2,000 ex-servicemen in the force is a recent development.

It was disclosed by Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali in his news conference on Monday in which he dilated upon the decisions taken a day earlier in a meeting to review law and order in the city.

In Karachi's present circumstances, the input of the military can certainly be useful to some extent, and has already proven so. And of course merit-based recruitment is key to a police force focused on fighting crime rather than pleasing its political masters. Inducting more police personnel for a city of Karachi's size is also much needed.

However, it is important that they be locally recruited. The Sindh Rangers, a federal force whose officers are from the army, has been repeatedly accused of a certain lack of 'local' sensitivity, a provocative element in the city's already combustible ethnic mix.

It is also a fact that some exceedingly ruthless and corrupt law-enforcement officials thrive and survive only because of their close links with the security establishment.

All things considered, even though the provincial government by its own actions has created the space for federal powers to interfere in its workings, the process of recruitment must remain its responsibility, one that it should carry out with more competence and honesty than it has traditionally shown in this respect.

There has been of late a qualitative change for the better in the upper echelons of the Karachi police since the removal of the previous police chief. It would serve the city far better for the provincial government and senior police officials to assume their responsibilities without their ‘minders’ in khaki.

Published in Dawn, June 29th, 2016

India-Pakistan: hardening positions

A familiar and unhappy trend is reasserting itself in the Pak-India relationship: the leaderships of both sides appear to be more interested in domestic posturing than genuinely seeking to engage each other.

Yesterday, foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz continued with his recent hardening line on India when he claimed that New Delhi was avoiding dialogue with Pakistan because dialogue would mean negotiating over difficult issues such as the Kashmir dispute.

While Mr Aziz reiterated that Pakistan remains open to resuming dialogue with India, the theme of his remarks suggested that he is far from convinced that breakthroughs on the dialogue front are imminent.

Read: 'India never opened a window of opportunity'

Earlier, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave an interview to a hawkish Indian TV outfit in which he suggested that his government’s policies had created difficulties for Pakistan in the international arena.

Mr Modi went on to claim that his government’s willingness to talk to Pakistan was complicated by the civil-military imbalance here. It was a quintessential performance by Mr Modi: claiming to be in favour of peace, while making peace the hardest possibility.

The emerging and familiar trend needs to be fought. Pak-India relations are too important for either side to allow old patterns to endlessly re-emerge and scuttle the hopes and aspirations of the two countries' peoples.

As ever, the answer remains in acknowledging that there is some merit to the arguments made by both sides. The bilateral dialogue that Mr Modi appears to have in mind is very different to the concerns Pakistan has.

Pakistan has never rejected discussing terrorism-related issues; in fact, the country's foreign policy architects have consistently argued that the Composite Dialogue, now the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue, has within it the means to address terrorism concerns alongside the core issues that Pakistan wants discussed.

Yet, just as Mr Modi and his government seem opposed to the very idea of negotiating over the Kashmir dispute, Pakistan downplays India's terrorism concerns.

Consider that after years of unresolved issues over the Mumbai attacks of November 2008, the Pathankot incident appears to be headed in the same direction.

If it is unreasonable of India to not want to discuss the Kashmir dispute, it is unrealistic of Pakistan to believe that India will simply move on from major terrorist incidents with the passage of time.

Amidst the cooling bilateral relationship, there remains at least one island of hope: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The prime minister's willingness and ability to personally reach out to Mr Modi is established.

Similarly, domestically Mr Sharif has shown a hitherto unknown capacity for restraint and a willingness to find ways to work with the military leadership. What remains to be seen is if the prime minister can pull off the ultimate balancing act between the complaints of Mr Modi and the demands of the military leadership.

Published in Dawn, June 30th, 2016

Istanbul carnage

TUESDAY's terrorist attack on Istanbul's international airport highlights both Turkey's worsening security situation and the militant Islamic State group's strategy to destabilise the strategically located Nato country.

Even though Ankara's civilian airport had seen a minor terrorist attack last December, this is for the first time that Ataturk airport, one of the world's busiest, has been subjected to a dual suicide bombing and gun attack that left over 40 people dead and some 240 injured.

Separatist Kurds have also been involved in recent attacks, but Tuesday's carnage seems to fall in line with IS's strategy to cripple Turkey's tourist industry — on Jan 12, a Syrian suicide-bomber killed 12 German tourists in Istanbul.

As Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, "much worse things could happen" unless "all governments and the entire mankind joined forces in the fight against terrorism".

With the five-year multilateral war in its south showing no signs of ending, the IS challenge is one of the many crises Turkey faces in a part of the world where terrorism, sectarian conflicts and civil wars have thrown into doubt the very survival of some states.

Tuesday's atrocity comes a day after Tehran reported the death of 14 Iranian troops and Kurdish militants in a clash.

The skirmish took place on the Iraq-Iran border; however, it highlights Turkey's own decades-old Kurdish insurgency, which has not only revived but seems to have gained strength after Kurdish fighters occupied a sliver of Syrian territory along the Turkish border.

Turkey has also been dealing with the flood of Syrian refugees with its consequent fallout on Ankara's relations with the European Union.

In this vortex of military, diplomatic and humanitarian crises, Turkey has to decide which side it is on.

The Syrian war is a multilateral conflict, but it often appears President Erdogan's government looks at it through its Kurdish prism and believes in a 'get Assad first' philosophy. What it must not forget is that President Bashar al-Assad's ouster is no guarantee of a peaceful, 'normal' Syria and that the fall of the Baathist regime could find IS better positioned in Turkey's underbelly.

Also, Ankara is grossly mistaken if it thinks IS could help it sort the Kurds out; it should know that IS does not believe in any alliances; it believes in a kill-all philosophy which considers death and destruction an end in themselves. It is time Ankara clarified its thinking and made the right choice.

Published in Dawn, June 30th, 2016

Over the moon

IT is a measure of just how complicated the affairs of this country have become when we are hopeful of a resolution to a problem in the temporary absence of one influential individual.

Mufti Popalzai, we are told, is away in Saudi Arabia to perform umrah, which raises expectations that, this time round, we might be able to celebrate Eid on the same day all over the country.

The mufti, who belongs to Masjid Qasim Ali Khan in Peshawar, has frequently been cast as the one-man force responsible for this country routinely having two Eids.

There is a long history to this controversy which is highlighted most during the sighting of the moon for Ramazan and Eidul Fitr.

So many years have gone into the dispute that now it appears as if it is no longer just a matter between the state-appointed Ruet-i-Hilal Committee and an individual who is routinely inclined to celebrate Eid a day earlier than the majority in the country.

Reports indicate that even when Mufti Popalzai and one or more of his top aides may be away, there is a system in place to assert the evidence of moon-sighting if and when the Qasim Khan followers see it fit.

In sum then, the chances of disagreement and controversy are there even when the renowned mufti is not.

It is quite clear that disagreement has to be addressed by confronting and discussing the issue rather than wishing for relief from the temporary removal of the dissenter.

The chances of a durable answer are linked to all sides sitting down and finding a way to celebrate together, without their usual hang-ups — however impossible a proposition this may seem.

Let's repeat it once more: science offers a way out, only if those in disagreement are willing to make use of it for the sake of clarity and cohesion. Others who have applied scientific formulae to deal with the matter are able to celebrate their Eids without the controversies that are common in Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, June 30th, 2016